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JUNE

15¢

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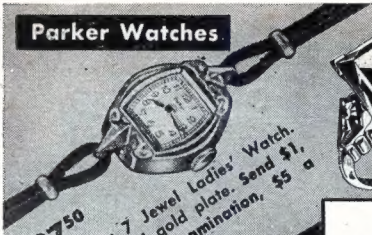

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CABIN-FEVER!.....*WALT COBURN* 10
The Magpie Kid, they predicted, would talk himself into a quick grave in that lonely Ghost Creek line-camp, where the great white solitude drove men to madness—and murder!

DUKE BAGLEY'S BOOTHILL BALLOT.....*WILLIAM R. COX* 24
That lovable, rambling tinhorn, Duke Bagley, could either swing Boot Town's election for the glamorous Duchess—or elect himself to a Boothill grave!

HELL'S HIGH-GRADERS.....*CLIFF FARRELL* 38
Britt Burnett had no choice but to hand over the Treasure Express gold—unless he would see his own brother die, brand himself an outcast traitor by all honest miners.

BULLWHIP HELL HITS PEACE PIPE!.....*TOM ROAN* 52
That irascible pair, Heck Kilada and Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, just couldn't seem to hang together. . . . But this time they would certainly hang separately, unless they could settle with that blood-hungry sheep-shyster crew!

THE SHERIFF BUYS A WAR!.....*ART LAWSON* 70
They thought Sheriff Spike Carr had forgotten how to fight. . . . Until a girl, a fighting graybeard, and two pairs of sodbuster shoes started him moving—into a deadly trigger-trap!

HANGIN' HOBBS' THIRTEENTH KNOT.....*FRANK BONHAM* 82
Was Hangin' Hobbs tough enough to keep his famous noose from his own throat, to help save the life of an innocent citizen?

★ ★ ★ ★ Star Features ★ ★ ★ ★

UP THE TRAIL.....*A DEPARTMENT* 6
The spirit of the West's pioneers still lives with us today!

THE BRANDING CORRAL.....*CONDUCTED BY STRAWBOSS* 8
A friendly gathering place for those who like to swap talk about the West.

CASTLE IN THE CACTUS.....*ROY VANDERGOOT* 23
Death Valley Scotty's palace in the desert remains an unsolved mystery.

SOMETHING UNDER HIS HAT!.....*CHEYENNE TAYLOR* 51
His trail-mates thought he was loco when he said he could make a tent out of rabbit fur!

JULY ISSUE OUT JUNE 8TH!

Published every month by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City 17. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter September 5, 1933, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1945, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. U. S. A. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Foreign postage $1.00 extra. Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, 17. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable, and send to Editorial Department, 205 East 42nd Street, N. Y. C., 17. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although all care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

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UP THE TRAIL

DEEP beneath a rampaging sea, the Navy pharmacist's mate is bent over the huddled form on the makeshift operating table. The place: enemy waters. The ship: a U.S. Navy submarine. The man on the operating table: a crewman about to undergo one of the most unusual operations in history.

The man holding the scalpel is not a doctor—he is merely a Naval enlisted man, attempting a difficult job under unimaginably difficult conditions.

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The operation proceeds. The patient lives. . . .

In war, under the strains and stresses of minute-to-minute emergencies, our fighting men today are performing miracles such as these—and they are all in the day's work.

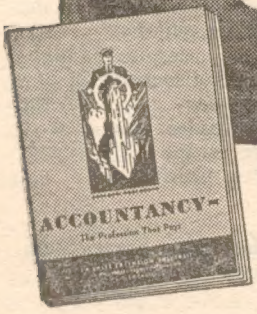
That, too, was the American way in the great days of our early West.

Take the heart-warming incident that occurred in the Dakota Territory, when a pioneer doctor named Brule traveled more than forty miles on horseback, over snow-covered trails in the dead of Winter, to save the life of a man whom he personally detested. Dan Higbee, the patient, likewise felt a personal enmity towards Doc Brule. They had once been partners in the cattle business; but Higbee, craftily pretending the business was failing, had bought out the Doc's share for a song, thus gaining control of one of the most successful ranches in the section.

A bronc Higbee was trying to break had thrown him, smashing his left leg. Gangrene had set in, and the services of a qualified medical man became a matter of life or death.

Should the rancher-medico now help the man who had mulcted him of the right to a life of ease and prosperity? Doc Brule must have had his moment of indecision that day when his son rode in to plead with the Doc to ride that hazardous forty-mile trail to Brule's isolated ranch. But Brule went. And with a bowie knife and ordinary carpenter's saw as his only instruments, he removed the gangrenous leg and saved his enemy's life.

The story of Doc Brule, to our mind, is typical of the men who made our West—typical of the pioneer spirit of "can do," which is so inherently the spirit inspiring Americans, today, on hard-fought battlefronts through the world. It is men like Doc Brule, men like the submarine pharmacist's mate—frontiersmen both—who, today, are helping to bring renewed hope to a troubled, war-torn world.



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Conducted by Strawboss

AN almost legendary figure of our Old West was Col. Emilio Kosterlitzky, who, before ultimately taking over the job of directing the U.S. Secret Service in Los Angeles, had a spectacularly dangerous, exciting and romantic career as commander of the Mexican Guardia Rural. Don Mathewson, from "down New Mexico way," writes interestingly of this famous character.

Speak your piece, Don:

Dear Strawboss:

It seems to me that a somewhat neglected figure in our histories and stories of the Old West is Col. Emilio Kosterlitzky, who, as commanding officer of the Mexican Guardia Rural, ruled the whole Northern District of Mexico as his forefathers had once ruled in Russia.

Col. Kosterlitzky, a romantic figure of those times, held life-or-death power over every man on the Mexican side of the Border—from El Paso, Texas, to Yuma, Ariz.

A right-hand man to President Diaz, Kosterlitzky was a soldier born and bred, erect of bearing, stern-eyed and stiff, but always the gentleman, and to the meek and lowly, courtesy itself. Many sought his death, and for this reason he never is known to have turned his back to anyone, and when he dined with strangers was invariably careful to keep his back to the wall and a table between himself and his dining companions.

He traveled in a coach drawn by four powerful horses, like a veritable king in his own right, and his private coach was sumptuously fitted out with a let-down bed inside, and in the boot, a food or "chuck box" that was invariably filled, also, with the best liquors money could buy. With him at all times on his trips were his personal striker, who also acted as cook, and a Mexican Army surgeon. A second coach which followed the Colonel's was equipped as an emergency ambulance for use of his men.

Like the Texas Rangers, the neighboring body of Police along the Rio Grande on the American side, Kosterlitzky's men had the bad men of two nations to contend with—Mexican and American, and along the Arizona line especially he was up against the most desperate aggregation of outlaws, cutthroats and fugitives that ever rode a stolen horse. Kosterlitzky had his band of secret police too, under the leadership of a Mexican romantically called "El Zoro."

Kosterlitzky would execute a man at once if he had decided he was guilty, and notorious offenders against the law were hung to some tree along the trail with an ominous sign above them which read:

"Who molests this body will receive the same punishment.—Kosterlitzky.

Oddly, Col. Kosterlitzky, despite his high-handed methods and quick dispensing of justice, wound up his legendary career on the American side of the border. He died in 1928, while in charge of the U.S. Secret Service in Los Angeles, California.

Mustang Hunters

Tim Bloodboy, of the Lone Stare State, writes relative to mustangs.

Dear Strawboss:

A great many folk still believe that all Texas ponies were "mustangs," and so call them, but the rancher made a sharp distinction between his stock and these wild 'uns of the plains. For years they were a menace to his business and did not all disappear from the range until as late as 1880.

One thing is sure: These mustangs were a lot swifter and smarter than ordinary range horses, and no cowboy ever did round up a full band of mustangs, no matter how hard he rode or how many tricks he tried. Once a bunch of cowmen spent all night building a corral fence back in a mountain pass through which a band of these wild 'uns were accustomed to run whenever they were chased. The next day, when the cowmen took after 'em, they followed their usual course—until they came opposite the mouth of the narrow pass. Then, without the slightest hesitation, they ran on past the trap, thus breaking a custom they had invariably followed until that particular day. And the new corral had been built far back from their sight, in the narrowest section of the pass!

More next month, amigos, and until then—

Hasta Luego!
—STRAWBOSS.

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★ CABIN-FEVER! ★

By Walt Coburn

Anyone who ran off at the mouth as much as the Magpie Kid, they said, would surely talk his way into a sudden grave. . . . Maybe that was why the shrewd Circle Bar wagon boss exiled both the Kid and his taciturn pardner to the Ghost Creek line-camp, where the white winter loneliness had already driven stronger men than those two punchers to madness—or to murder!

CHAPTER ONE

Ghost-Ranch

WHISPERING SID and the Magpie Kid had gone into winter line-camp where the mouth of Ghost Creek empties into the Missouri River. That was early in November, and before December the big snow would come. Later more snowstorms would pile on top of it, and before Christmas the drifts would fill the breaks and blanket the ridges. Thereafter the badlands would be sealed in frozen, unbroken whiteness until the warm Chinook winds cut away the deep drifts the following Spring. Thus Whispering Sid and the Magpie Kid would be snowbound together at the Ghost Creek line camp during a long Montana winter.

Before the last late beef shipment, Felix

The Kid swung his loop. . . .

A Stirring Saga of the Blizzard Trails

Barcus, the big Circle Bar wagon boss, had cut back what stuff looked poor enough to need winter feed and had dropped the cattle in the Ghost Creek lower field. What stuff the round-up missed in the badlands could be picked up later by Whispering Sid and the Magpie Kid in their daily rides back into the rough breaks. Rawhiding, it was called.

Felix Barcus had a warped sense of humor that had a way of cropping out in some cruel practical joke. When he got it in for a man he could bear down on him in a way that left the luckless victim no choice but to grin and bear it or make a scrap out of it. And Felix Barcus was tough as a boot and hard to whip.

Barcus had been nursing a grudge against Whispering Sid Smith for a long time. He knew Whispering Sid was the better cowman, and that except for his weakness for booze, could be holding down a wagon boss job instead of working as a common forty-a-month cowhand. That griped the big ramrod, so he had taken this way of working out his hate.

The Magpie Kid had made a bitter enemy out of Felix Barcus when he had first hired out to the Circle Bar and had ridden the big bronc called Brown Jug. Barcus had a habit of giving a new man a spoiled bronc to ride to test him out for riding ability and gameness. The outfit had a string of outlaws and Brown Jug topped the list of bad 'uns. And when this loud-mouthed, tow-headed kid put up a pay-day ride on the big brown outlaw, Felix Barcus had hidden his disappointment behind a flat-lipped grin and had told the Kid he'd put him on as a bronc peeler.

The Magpie Kid had taken the job, and before the wind-up of the calf round-up that spring he had broken the Brown Jug and half a dozen more outlaws and was roping and cutting cattle on them. And Felix Barcus's animosity towards the lanky, good-natured, too talkative Magpie Kid had grown into a bitter hatred. Oddly, however, the bronc riding Magpie Kid appeared to be the only man in the outfit unaware of the fact that he'd made a hard-hating enemy of Felix Barcus.

"If I hated two men that bad," Flapjack Meeks, the round-up cook, told the big wagon boss, "I'd cut their throats with a dull, rusty butcher knife. It'd be easier on 'em."

All that remark got out of the black-whiskered, green-eyed ramrod was a twisted grin. He seemed to like it because every man in the outfit knew why he had put the Kid and Smith in that winter line camp. He enjoyed building up that kind of a rep for himself.

"Hell, Flapjack," he had told the cook, "that Ghost Crick line camp is the softest winter job the Circle Bar kin hand a man. Nice warm cabin, plenty grub, and hay enough to feed all the pore stuff in the Circle Bar iron. Duck soup, I'd call it." He sipped his cup of strong black coffee there in the mess tent, straddling the cook's bedroll.

"You know damned well what'll happen, Barcus," Flapjack answered. "Whisperin' Sid an' the Magpie Kid will kill one another before the first Chinook wind cuts the drifts away."

"Now that," the wagon boss had grinned flatly, "would just be a mortal shame, wouldn't it?" His eyes had a brittle greenness as he finished his coffee and noisily flung the empty tin cup into the big dishpan. His spurs jingled a mocking tune as he swaggered out of the mess tent.

SOMEWHERE along the years Sid Smith had lost his voice. Some said it had been a throat ailment, but the cow country claimed it was the whiskey. In any case, he could not speak above a rasping whisper. Smith was round-shouldered and bow-legged, with brownish hair and a grayed, drooping mustache. His leathery skin was deeply seamed around his eyes, which were as blue as the Montana sky. He was a quiet man when sober, but when tipsy he would talk your ears deaf in that husky whiskey voice he had.

The real name of the gray-eyed, tow-headed Magpie Kid was Horace Cowan, and he came from Texas. Tall and lean-muscled, he had an easy grin that spread his wide mouth still wider and crinkled his eyes almost shut. He joshed and laughed a lot, and the tougher things broke the wider he grinned. It was almost impossible to goad him out of that habitual good humor. And he had all the easy, good-natured patience in the world with a bronc, which made him worth ten times the wages he got for riding the Circle Bar rough string. But he talked too much, and his constant chatter had thus earned him the nickname of Magpie Kid.

Around the Circle Bar outfit of twenty or thirty men, the Magpie Kid's constant stream of idle talk made for amusement. But in some snowbound line camp, especially in the solitary company of a silent man like Whispering Sid Smith, the Magpie Kid's continual chatter was going to work like slow poison on his camp pardner. It would be like the old torture of staking a man spread-eagled and letting water drip slowly, relentlessly on his forehead, until the tortured man's brain breaks and he goes stark, raving mad. That was what they figured would happen at the Ghost Creek line camp. The Magpie Kid's shatter was going to drive Whispering Sid locoed. Both men packed six-shooters. There was bound to be a killing—perhaps a double killing.

"And what," demanded Flapjack Meeks, "will become of them cattle they're feedin'? And their winter horses? Who'll be there to shovel hay and chop water holes in the ice?"

Felix Barcus grinned thinly at the question. He said somebody probably would show up to look after the stock, like when Phil Hurley went locoed and killed himself there that winter. Hurley's cattle had ga'anted up some and the two horses he'd left tied in the barn had eaten their mangers till the wood looked beaver-chawed. But hay and water had put the taller back on their ribs and the Circle Bar had got the Hurley place dirt cheap, for no more than the taxes due on it.

"It was you that found Phil Hurley, wasn't it, Barcus?" asked Flapjack.

"Yeah." Felix Barcus' green eyes glinted. "A shore purty thing to look upon. He'd swallered the end of his six-shooter an' pulled the trigger."

Flapjack had no stomach for the grisly details, which he had heard before. "That damned place is haunted," he said. "I wouldn't spend a night alone in that cabin fer all the money on earth. The river 'breeds up there claim that Phil Hurley never killed hisself. And some of us still wonders," the cook's eyes sharpened, "how come Felix Barcus was fifty miles away from the Circle Bar home ranch when Hurley was killed."

Felix Barcus still grinned flatly, but his eyes were like river ice.

"If you didn't have sourdough fer brains, Flapjack," he told the round-up cook, "you'd know better'n to strain your mind thataway. It could be dangerous."

"You're a damned snake, Barcus," said Flapjack evenly. "Just a damned cold-blooded snake."

"Your daughter Aggie don't think so,"

Barcus leered, and his green eyes glinted.

"You leave Aggie alone, mister. I'd ruther see a daughter of mine dead than married to you."

"Who said anything about gittin' married to ary squawman's half-breed daughter?"

FLAPJACK MEEKS grabbed up a meat cleaver. But the gun in the big ramrod's hand stopped him.

"Don't crowd your luck, Flapjack," Barcus warned. "I got my eye on the Meeks place acrost the river from the Ghost Crick line camp." And while the grin remained on his black-whiskered face, there was murder in the big ramrod's ice-cold eyes.

Flapjack Meeks got hold of himself. He laid down the meat cleaver and wiped his sweat-dampened hands on his floursack apron.

"My wife," he said with a forced quietness, "is a half-breed Sioux, but she's mission-educated and Agnes teaches school at Rocky Point Crossin'. Furthermore, I'm tellin' you here an' now, big mister, that if ever you lay a hand on that daughter of mine, they'll find you bushwhacked somewheres along that old Missouri River. Also, I hope you got a man in this outfit kin cook, because here's your two-bit job." And Flapjack Meeks yanked off his floursack apron and put on his hat. Thus the Circle Bar lost the best round-up cook in that part of the cow country.

That same day the outfit pulled in at the home ranch. The beef round-up was over, and snow was already on the ground.

Flapjack Meeks threw his bed horse in with the two pack horses that were carrying the tarp-covered beds belonging to Whispering Sid and The Magpie Kid. Then he rode along with them, driving the pack horses and the two work horses the line camp riders would need to haul hay.

The sky was as gray as gun lead and spitting snow, threatening the first big blow. Flapjack Meeks reckoned it must be ten below. They wore their earflaps down and their overcoats buttoned. They all had two-buckled overshoes made to fit their high-heeled boots, and sheep-lined tapaderos on their stirrups. Saddles creaked and the chain harness rattled in the frosty still air. Whispering Sid rode humped over his saddle horn, while Flapjack Meeks' gaunt face was pinched and blue-lipped, and the end of his nose already white from frost-bite.

The Magpie Kid had a brand-new, flannel-lined muskrat fur cap in his warsack. His ears were protected by a heavy black silk muffler tied down over the crown of his Stetson hat and fastened under his chin. And instead of the mittens worn by the others, he had on heavy buckskin gloves. The cold reddened his lean, tanned face, but he laughed at it and said this was his first Montana winter and he wanted to get all he could out of it before it turned hot again next July. He was young with the warmth of youth and his eyes were bright and sparkling. He bared both hands to roll and light a brown-paper cigarette.

"I bet this makes Whisperin' Sid wonder what's become of his summer's wages," he remarked with a laugh.

Flapjack Meeks cut the exuberant young bronc twister a sharp, meaning look.

"Trouble is with you ol'-timers," the Magpie Kid went on heedlessly, "you put all your hard earnt money into houses an' lots. Gamblin' houses, an' lots of likker." And his young laughter sounded too loud in the early winter stillness.

Whispering Sid let on not to be listening, but Flapjack Meeks took it up.

"You run off at the head too much, son," he declared bluntly. "And you might as well git it now as fu'ther up the crick. Felix Barcus is figgerin' fer that jaw music of yourn to wear down Sid till Sid gut-shoots you so's he kin enjoy the peaceful quiet."

The Magpie Kid chuckled. That struck him as being so comical he had to laugh. And even Whispering Sid grinned faintly. But there was no trace of amusement showing on Flapjack Meeks' frost-pinched face.

"I'm a-tellin' you for your own good, Kid," he repeated insistently, "the both of yuh. Felix Barcus is plannin' cold-blooded murder. He hates your guts, Kid, because you rode them outlaw broncs, and deep in his black heart Felix Barcus is scared of a bad horse. And he hates Sid Smith because he knows Sid kin ask fer the Circle Bar ramrod job and git it whenever he makes up his mind to let the booze alone." Flapjack Meeks' voice sounded brittle.

"Why, for gosh sakes," laughed the Magpie Kid, "Me'n Sid is camp pardners! You're talkin' through your hat, Flapjack!"

"Mebbyso," muttered Whispering Sid, "and on the other hand, mebby not. A winter line camp kin git like a prison, son—two men penned up together thataway. Convicts in the pen go locoed. This'll be your first winter in a lonesome line camp, Kid, remember that. And Flapjack's plumb right. You do talk too much."

THERE was no kind of a threat in Whispering Sid's queer voice. He was grinning faintly, and there was only amused tolerance in his puckered, sky-blue eyes. And then he made an odd gesture. He pulled an old wooden-handled six-shooter from the deep pocket of his black angora wool chaps, and taking it by its long barrel, shoved it towards Flapjack Meeks.

"Winter this fer me, will you, Flapjack?" he said in his whispering voice.

Flapjack Meeks took the gun and shoved it into the pocket of his coonskin coat. Then, as they rode along the snow-skifted round-up trail towards the Missouri River, the grizzled little cook kept cutting sidelong glances at the Magpie Kid and worriedly chewing the ends of his ragged tobacco-stained mustache.

But the Magpie Kid was whistling as though enjoying some hidden josh on these two old codgers. Whispering Sid paid the young bronc stomper little serious attention, but the tuneless whistle finally broke Flapjack down.

"You keep on a-whistlin' that hungry tune, young feller," he snapped, "and I'll bend a gun barrel down between your mule ears."

"Tell us again, Flapjack," said the Magpie Kid, "about how ol' Phil Hurley's murdered ghost haunts the line camp." He was grinning. But the sparkle was gone from his gray eyes now, and they suddenly looked as bleak as the wintry sky.

The squawman who lived ten miles down the river from the Ghost Creek line camp and worked as cook during the round-up seasons, replied that the ghost business was just a lot of whiskey talk amongst the river 'breeds. No white man believed in ghosts. Just the same, he, Flapjack Meeks, would rather buck a blizzard than spend a night in Hurley's cabin. And Phil Hurley never did kill himself. It was the front of Phil's skull, not the back of his head, that was blowed off. Even the damned mountain rats couldn't conceal that ugly evidence. And while Felix Barcus could soften up the river 'breeds with a jug of rotgut and put the fear of God in their hearts, he couldn't make a believer out of Flapjack Meeks. You couldn't hire one of them 'breeds, drunk or sober, to set foot on the old Hurley place. Felix Barcus had had to fetch down a crew of ignorant Sowegians to put up the hay crop at the place.

"Felix Barcus wanted that ranch," said Flapjack Meeks, "and Phil Hurley wouldn't put a price on it. He wouldn't sell out and he wouldn't scare off. So he got bushwhacked. You go to the land office and take a look at the records. The Ghost Crick Ranch don't belong to the Circle Bar, it's filed now in the name of Felix Barcus. And it's only one of half a dozen such ranches. Only Felix either bought them other places at his own price or run off the little rancher that owned 'em.

"Felix Barcus," he went on, "owns half a dozen remnant irons, and he's got cattle in all of 'em. His ranches are strung along both sides of the river. He leases 'em to the Circle Bar and brands his calves and ships his steers in them remnant irons. The Circle Bar is owned by a little bunch of dudes at Butte—minin' an' smelter men that don't know which end of a beef steer the tail is hung on. And Felix Barcus draws down top wages for rustlin' cattle from 'em. He's bin after my place, too, but he ain't a-gittin' it—not at any price. Phil Hurley wasn't no friend of mine, but murder is murder. And if you boys ever ride up on my dead carcass, you'll know Felix Barcus done it."

CHAPTER TWO

Ice-Trap for Two!

FLAPJACK MEEKS was still alive at Christmas. He played the fiddle from dark till daybreak at the Rocky Point Crossing dance. Nor had Whispering Sid and the Magpie Kid killed one another yet. They shaved and cut each other's hair with a pair of sheep shears, took hot soapy baths in a washtub, put on clean duds and rode down the river a dozen miles to Rocky Point Crossing.

Whispering Sid got drunk and talked the ears off every man he could corner. It was rambling whiskey talk mostly, though he did say it looked to him like the Magpie Kid was going slowly locoed.

"Believe it, Flapjack, or call me a liar," he whispered, "but the Magpie Kid is as spooky as a colored man at a graveyard in the dark of the moon. He's rubbed the fur plumb off the rabbit's foot he packs to ward off the ghost of Phil Hurley. He beds down by candle light with a six-shooter handy. All the hooraw an' josh has plumb died out in 'im."

Flapjack had to admit that the Magpie Kid looked changed. He seemed quieter, and leaner and harder around his mouth and eyes. His grin had lost something of its easy boyishness and his laughter now had an almost forced gaiety. And there was a restless, sort of haunted glint in his gray eyes.

But now the Magpie Kid was having the time of his life. He was by far the best dancer on the floor, almost swinging the girls off their feet as Flapjack called the square dances. He claimed every waltz with little Aggie Meeks, who was black-haired, but pretty and fair-skinned for a quarter-breed girl, with eyes a dusky, smoke-colored gray. Dancing with the six-foot bronc rider, Aggie looked tiny and small-boned. But they made a mighty handsome couple and they had hit it off right from their first meeting, talking and laughing into each other's eyes until the strained look gradually faded from the Magpie Kid's frost-blackened face and the sparkle came back into his eyes.

Flapjack Meeks watched them covertly. It was the first time he had ever seen his oldest daughter Agnes so gay and happy. He was so proud of Aggie that it made tears come to his

eyes to see her enjoy herself like that. For all her book learning, Aggie, until now, had always been as shy and timid with strangers as a baby fawn—shy of men as if she was afraid of being hurt, somehow. And this was the first time in her life that little Aggie Meeks had shed all that timid reserve and let herself go. Her cheeks were flushed and her dark gray eyes starry under their long black lashes. And now it was her squawman father who was afraid for her. Because, if he read the sign right, Aggie was in love with that tall, towheaded young bronc rider from Texas. And after all, what did they know about this Magpie Kid? Who was he, actually? He could be an outlaw on the dodge. Aggie had no business letting that lanky bronc-twister rush her off her feet. . . .

WHISPERING SID would quit his jug and drinking cronies long enough to come into the big store where the dance was going on. And there he would stand back in the far shadows, narrowly watching the Magpie Kid as he pranced through a quadrille or Virginia Reel with pretty Aggie Meeks. And towards midnight a worried look clouded Whispering Sid's puckered blue eyes and he told Flapjack Meeks that it looked like his little Aggie had hazed all the spook out of the Magpie Kid.

"First time he's laughed in two weeks, Flapjack," Whispering Sid said. "Aggie's good medicine fer the Kid, but I don't like it, nohow. I'd give a barrel of river likker if I'd kept him at the line camp. . . . Shore, he's havin' hisself a time to-night, because there's lights burnin' and a crowd around 'im and he's had a few jolts of forty rod and he's dancin' with the purtiest girl in Montana. But we got to pull out at daybreak and git back to the line camp. Then he'll be ridin' with his hand on his gun an' a-lookin' back acrost his shoulder like a man on the dodge. The Kid ain't lazy. He'll do ten men's work choppin' open water holes or saddlin' Brown Jug or Lizard and ridin' off into the badlands, rawhidin'. He'll come back plumb tuckered, but he won't bed down an' go to sleep. He'll stand there at that frost-covered winder with a gun in his hand. Or he'll slip into his clothes an' take his gun an' tell me to bar the door when he goes out, and not to open it till he gives the right password. And come mornin' he'll cut fer sign."

"What kinda sign, Sid? Ghost sign?" questioned Flapjack Meeks.

"He don't say. But he's shore fergot how to laugh, Flapjack. And his grin gives a man the shivers. We ain't bin in camp two months and he's goin' locoed a'ready. The devil in

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hell knows what he'll be like before the Chinook melts the drifts. He ain't safe. And Aggie ain't safe, neither, with a man like that. I don't like it worth a damn."

It wasn't all whiskey talk. It looked to Flapjack Meeks like Whispering Sid Smith was drinking to take the chill of fear out of his guts. And he figured that Sid would ask him for his six-shooter back before he pulled out for the line camp.

But it was the Magpie Kid who told Flapjack Meeks to give the gun back to Whispering Sid.

"Whisperin' Sid," the tall young Texan told the squawman, "might need that six-shooter of his. Make him pack it."

"To shoot Phil Hurley's ghost?"

The Magpie Kid grinned wolfishly. "What do you think, Flapjack?"

There was a big midnight supper, later. Aggie Meeks piled a tin plate high with home-cooked grub and handed it to the Magpie Kid. Then they sat at the far end of the room on the long store counter and acted for all the world like a pair of school kids. Aggie gnawed a wishbone clean and they wished on it and Aggie got the wish. She said she couldn't tell her wish because if she did it wouldn't ever come true. And it was a real wish, she said, and she *wanted* it to come true . . . for both of them. But as long as he had lost anyhow he could tell her what he'd wished.

She saw the grin leave his frost-blackened face then, and the sparkle die out in his gray eyes, leaving them as cold and hard as steel. And the look on his face suddenly frightened her.

"All I wished, Aggie," he said quietly, too quietly, "was to lay the ghost of Phil Hurley."

Aggie Meeks had to let it go at that. There was something in the way he looked past her, as if he really saw some ghost outside the frost-coated windows, that forbade any kind of questioning.

Then the Magpie Kid shrugged his muscle-bunched shoulders and grinned at her and the sparkle came back to his eyes. But it was a long time before that chill left Aggie Meeks' heart, and even then something of it remained there, like a lump of ice.

When the first bleak light of dawn broke, Whispering Sid and the Magpie Kid saddled their horses and pulled out for the Ghost Creek line camp. It was Christmas morning, and snowing again.

BEFORE they pulled out, the Magpie Kid had managed to get a few minutes alone with Aggie Meeks. "This is the best Christmas I ever had, Aggie," the Kid said, holding both her hands and looking down into her eyes. "I'd like to hope there'd be more like it. For just the two of us. Me'n you."

"There will be, Horace," Aggie used his real name, "if my wish comes true." Her cheeks were flushed and her voice sounded very small.

He would have kissed her right then, but he hadn't had the nerve. So they stood there awkwardly, her hands held so tight in his that she felt the pain, but it made her happy and somehow she was glad he didn't kiss her goodbye, that he wanted to wait.

"After that wish of mine comes true, Aggie," the Kid said, "I'll come back. But first, I've got to lay Phil Hurley's ghost." And a forced grin had twisted his lips.

It was after that meeting that he had told Flapjack Meeks to give Whispering Sid back his six-shooter.

It was one of those soft, heavy snows without a breeze and with the heavy flakes drifting down so that you couldn't see fifty feet ahead. Whispering Sid, more than half drunk, rode in the lead. Flapjack had given him a jug to take back to camp and he kept nibbling at it as he rode, hump-shouldered, resting it across his saddle horn.

They had to pass the Meeks' place a few miles from Rocky Point Crossing. Flapjack had bought the store at Rocky Point and was wintering there with his family. Usually he fed cattle there for the Circle Bar, but this winter he'd told Felix Barcus he wasn't letting the outfit use his place for a winter line camp. He'd closed his cabin.

They could see the blurred log buildings and pole corrals, gray blobs without shape in the snow storm. Then the Magpie Kid called to Whispering Sid and pointed a long arm. "There's a light in the cabin yonder, Sid."

The storm had slacked and they could see through it for a distance of perhaps a hundred yards. And it did look as if there was a faint spot of yellow light in the frost-covered cabin windows. But even as Whispering Sid pawed the soft snow from his eyes with a fur-mittened hand, the light vanished.

"The hell with it, Kid!" Whispering Sid growled. "Come on, we got cattle to water an' feed. If it's some 'breed Flapjack sent to stay there, he's gittin' breakfast. We got no time to stop an' auger."

"We're the first ones to leave the dance, Sid. You heard Flapjack say so. They're all stayin' for Christmas."

"Then, damnit, it's Phil Hurley's ghost and we don't want no part of it! Rattle your hocks. We got livestock to tend to."

Whispering Sid rode on, the Magpie Kid following him. But the Kid kept twisting with his weight in one stirrup to look back. And once he thought he saw a man on foot near the cabin. Then a flurry of snow blotted out the Meeks place and they kept on their way.

They followed the river, traveling on the ice. The river banks were drifted with snow piled so high that only the bare tops of the high willows showed like sticks stuck in the drifts. And the giant cottonwoods were bleak skeletons, the bare branches distorted, gray-boned arms reaching into the storm.

Snow coated the deep river ice, but it was only a few inches deep and the sharp-shod hoofs of their horses bit through it to crush the ice with each step. Off in the badlands a wolf howled.

They were almost home when Whispering Sid and his horse went through the ice.

HE was riding quite a ways in the lead, but the Magpie Kid heard the croaking whisper of alarm and lifted his head just in time to see horse and rider pitch headlong into the water and disappear from sight. A moment afterward Sid's head and arms showed above the surface as his mittened hands clutched at the brittle edge of a thin skift of rubbery ice. Then the horse's head and neck rose and the fear-crazed horse, shod hoofs churning the water, missed the man's head by inches as it tried to climb him.

The Magpie Kid moved faster than ever he'd moved in his life. In an instant his coiled rope was off his saddle horn, his mittens thrown away to free bare hands. Then the loop was built and the rope was snaking out through the snow.

"Under both arms, Sid! Loop it!" he yelled.

Whispering Sid had been partly drunk, but the icy water had instantly restored him to sobriety. Weighted down by his heavy overshoes, angora chaps and coonskin coat, he never did remember how he got that loop under both arms. He felt the jerking tug of it hauling him up out of the water, up and over the edge of solid ice and then across it for twenty or thirty feet. Then he was no longer being dragged by the Kid's saddle horn. He lay there in a daze and saw the Magpie Kid bent over him. The Kid flipped off the saddle rope, then was roping the floundering horse in the strip of open water.

"Shake a leg, there, Sid," he called back, "or you'll lose a good horse! Grab a tail holt."

It was a job that had to be done swiftly. The Kid had Sid's horse roped around the neck, and then, dazed and half drowned as he was, Whispering Sid was able to witness what he afterward called the finest demonstration of man and horse savvy he had ever seen. The Magpie Kid was off his horse and at the slippery edge of the deep ice, easing the loop, talking to the big Brown Jug like he'd talk to a man.

"Gimme slack, Jug. . . . More. . . . More, now. . . . Good!"

He had hold of the horse's head and was pulling it up and Sid had grabbed the floating tail and was hanging onto it. The Kid widened the loop and worked it under the horse's legs and back towards the withers, jerking it tight. And then the Magpie Kid was gripping the horn of Sid's saddle and shoving down, then lifting quickly, using the water to buoy the struggling horse.

"Take it away, Jug!" The Kid's voice cracked. "Take it away!"

The big Brown Jug gelding whirled. The rope tied to the saddle horn tightened and showers of splintered ice spatted up as the sharp-shod hoofs dug deep for the pull.

"Steady an' slow, Jug. Steady, boy! Tight it, Jug. Haul steady. Hang onto that tail, Sid!"

There was a heaving splash as Brown Jug and the two men tugged and lifted. The half-drowned Circle Bar gelding slid out of the icy water and over the edge of the deep ice and was dragged across it to safety.

They got the floundering bay onto its feet and then the Magpie Kid had to lift Whispering Sid up into his saddle. After that they headed for camp at a trot. Sid's clothes were frozen stiff as boards by the time they got there.

"Rub 'im down good, Kid." Sid's croaking whisper came from behind clenched and chattering teeth. "Use my beddin' to blanket 'im. I don't give a damn if it takes all my soogans."

THE Magpie Kid was nearly as soaking wet as the older man, but he grinned and nodded, then pulled the cork on the jug that, hung by a whang leather loop from Sid's saddle horn, had not been lost or broken.

"Skin outa your duds, Sid," he said, "and crawl into bed and work on that jug. I'll tend to your pony."

"I'll help you with the chores directly I git into dry duds," Whispering Sid wheezed hoarsely. "You're a good man . . . Horace."

Hours later, they sat by the stove drinking hot coffee spiked with whiskey, Whispering Sid wrapped in a couple of heavy Hudson's Bay blankets.

The Magpie Kid had tended to their horses and chopped open fresh water holes. He had scattered a load of hay for the cattle, spent half an hour looking over the open strip of river where the accident had occurred, and returned to the cabin, finally, to find Sid trying to get a big pot of coffee to boil by cussing it.

The Magpie Kid's wet clothes had frozen stiff and he was shaking and blue-lipped from cold as he stripped and gave himself a hard rubdown. After that he pulled on heavy dry clothes. The log cabin was warm, now, but Sid was still shivering.

"I don't savvy how come," croaked Whis-

pering Sid. "I was a little drunk, shore, and snow covered that ice. But I'd swear there wasn't no big air hole in the ice there yesterday, when we musta rode right over the same ice. It was three-four foot thick, and the only airhole I know is up the river, at the rapids. Even if I was drunk, that horse of mine wouldn't a trotted into no airhole, snow er no snow."

"Somebody borrowed the loan of our axe and ice saw," said the Kid dryly. "He musta worked half the night sawing out blocks of ice and shovin' 'em under the lower edge. He sawed a gap in the ice about twenty feet square and shoved the blocks under with a pike pole. Then the water froze over mebbyso an inch and the snow covered it and it made a good water trap for us to ride into. And if you hadn't rode on ahead and I hadn't moped along behind, thinkin' about little Aggie Meeks someday bein' Mrs. Horace Cowan, we'd have both rode into it."

Whispering Sid sneezed and a shiver swept him. The Magpie Kid put him to bed and piled blankets and soogans from both beds on him and fed him strong hot toddies. Whispering Sid still shivered and shook. The young bronc rider rubbed horse liniment on Sid's swollen left shoulder, where a shod hoof had struck it a glancing blow. The grizzled Sid was in for it. He'd be lucky if he did not get pneumonia and die. And it was fifty miles from the snowbound camp to the nearest doctor. There was no way out. The Magpie Kid had to stay here and nurse his camp pardner and feed and water a couple of hundred head of cattle. He could not leave the camp long enough to ride to Rocky Point for help, even if he dared leave Sid alone that long, which he didn't.

One man had already met death here in this log cabin, even though Felix Barcus had called it suicide. No, the Magpie Kid was not leaving his camp pardner alone. There were too many risks, all around.

"I'd like to gamble, Sid," the Kid said when he had fed the older man a strong hot toddy, "that Felix Barcus is eatin' Christmas dinner at Rocky Point Crossin'. That was his light we seen at the Meeks place."

Whispering Sid shivered and said you couldn't pick any part of an argument with him on that. Whether Phil Hurley's ghost or Felix Barcus, somebody had damn' near drownded one of the best damn' geldin's in the Circle Bar remuda and as long as he, Whispering Sid, worked for the outfit, he wasn't going to stand by and see Circle Bar stock abused! He'd never shot a ghost in his life, but if the Magpie Kid would look in the right hand pocket of them black wool chaps hangin' up to dry, he'd find a six-shooter that he'd borrowed back from Flapjack Meeks for just such a purpose. And they'd have another little horn of likker on that to bind the deal.

WHISPERING SID was getting drunk again and talking forty-miles-an-hour. Some of it was loose and rambling, but parts of it made sense and the Magpie Kid listened to all of it and sorted out what he wanted. Now and then the old cowpuncher would sneeze and the young bronc peeler would say, "Howdy!" and feed him another drink. There was nearly a gallon or booze to work on and the Magpie Kid's limit was two or three drinks. Sid was mumbling deliriously when the Magpie Kid went out to do the evening chores and he was still talking to himself when the tall young Texan came back to the log cabin carrying an armload of wood. He dumped the load and lit a candle.

Whispering Sid had thrown off the blankets and soogan quilts. His leathery skin was flushed and his blue eyes bloodshot and feverbright. He did not recognize the Magpie Kid now. Suddenly the old wooden-handled six-shooter in Sid's hand roared like a cannon. The Kid dropped the candle and threw himself flat on the floor. That slug from Whispering Sid's old .45 had been fired at the candle flame. But it had missed the flame and had hit the Kid's left hand. The thudding, ripping impact tore the candle out of his grip and his left hand and arm tingled clear to the shoulder.

The little log cabin was filled with the echoes and the heavy stench of burnt gunpowder, and through the heavy blackness sounded the croaking voice of Whispering Sid.

"Light another 'un, Felix! You cattle-rustlin', murderin' snake! You killed your cattle thief pardner, Phil Hurley, but you ain't killin' Sid Smith. . . ."

Pain was throbbing up the Magpie Kid's arm and into his shoulder—stabbing, burning, hellish pain. He inched his way along the hard-packed dirt floor of the log cabin until he was alongside the delirious old cowhand's bunk.

Then the Magpie Kid crouched and threw himself forward in the darkness. Whispering Sid's six-shooter roared, the flash of it blinding him as the .45 slug fanned his cheek and hot specks of black powder stung his face.

Whispering Sid fought with a savage ferocity and the younger man had to use everything he had. He wrenched the gun from Sid's claw-like grip and clubbed down with it in short, chopping blows. Finally a lucky blow knocked Sid out.

Waves of pain swept over the Magpie Kid. He got a match, lit a candle, and tied Whispering Sid to the bunk.

Then he lifted his mangled, bloody hand and stared at it with a shocked horror. The two smaller fingers of that hand had been shot

away as if by the clean blow of a sharp hatchet. And blood spurted with every pulse beat. He'd bleed to death unless he got that blood stopped.

It took all the guts and nerve the Kid possessed. Waves of dizziness swept him as he worked with a panicked clumsy desperation. It seemed an endless time before he got the mangled hand tightly bound with strips of rag ripped from floursack dish towels. Then he eased off the tight tourniquet he'd twisted around his wrist and poured himself a tin cup full of raw whiskey. He gulped it down and it stayed there in his squeamish stomach until its alcoholic fire pulsed through his veins.

Then he sank down on the edge of his bunk, weak, sick and dizzy from the throbbing, stabbing pain.

Whispering Sid's eyes blinked open and his voice croaked feebly as he fought the ropes that tied him down to his bunk. He ranted on deliriously for a time.

"I shore played hell, pardner," murmured the Magpie Kid, "when I told Flapjack Meeks to give you back your gun."

CHAPTER THREE

Gun-Ghost Comes to Life!

A MAN played his string out. That was what Horace Cowan, called the Magpie Kid, had to keep telling himself, over and over, like some kind of a desperate prayer. Hang and rattle! You hired out for a tough hand. Now play your string out!

It would be easy to weaken. If blood poison set in and crept up into his arm and shoulder and into his heart, it would turn the trick for Felix Barcus. And here beside him was Whispering Sid Smith, tied down and delirious and running a fever that would kill an ordinary man. And blood all over the place. Any coroner's jury in the cow country and even shrewd Flapjack Meeks wouldn't be able to call it anything but what it looked like. They would say the Magpie Kid had gone snow-locoed and Whispering Sid had shot him. They would say the Kid had then whipped old Sid Smith over the head with a gun barrel and tied him down there to die.

And Felix Barcus had an ironclad alibi. He'd show up there at Rocky Point Crossing on Christmas Day, not an hour after Whispering Sid and the Magpie Kid had pulled out. The Big Circle Bar ramrod had eaten Christmas dinner there, and stayed on for a few days afterward courting little Aggie Meeks. Nobody in the world could accuse Felix Barcus of double murder at the Ghost Creek line camp. . . .

And those bawling cattle! Starving for hay and water, bawling from before daybreak till after dark. The din of that alone was enough to drive a man locoed. And it was plain hell on a man who couldn't stand to see any animal suffer . . .

All that along with the pain and the fear of blood poison. And grizzled old Sid Smith croaking in that damned whispering voice all night long while the Magpie Kid kept him covered and fed him hot grub and whiskey.

A one-armed man can't chop water holes in the ice, can't pry hay from a frozen haystack and fork it into a rack and scatter it for two hundred head of starving cattle. The Kid had tried it and had come awake half frozen to death in the snow, with the hay fork stuck up on top of the stack from where he'd fallen into the heavy drifts between the stack and the empty hayrack.

He had used up all his strength tending the horse mangers night and morning, melting bucket after bucket of snow on the cabin stove and lugging it out to the barn to water the horses. It took all the guts he had to get even those simple chores done. And on top of that he had to nurse Whispering Sid and force himself to wolf down grub that tasted like so much sawdust.

All he had to do was saddle a horse and make the ride down the river to Rocky Point Crossing. They'd send help back to Sid and the starving cattle. And little Aggie could sure nurse a man well in no time. . . .

BUT a man played his string out. The second nightmare night Whispering Sid Smith had a rational hour or so. His blue eyes cleared and he asked the Magpie Kid what the hell was the matter with his hand, and how come he was tied down on his bunk. And the Magpie Kid put it to the old-timer, man to man.

"I'm gamblin', Sid, on Felix Barcus showin' up here," he said. "He did it before when he fetched Flapjack Meeks and some 'breeds

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along for witness and found Phil Hurley's dead carcass. Felix Barcus set that ice-trap, and in a day or two he'll mebbyso fetch Flapjack Meeks and some others along with him and they'll see them starvin' cattle and the barn shut and Barcus will figger we both drowned.

"I'm feedin' and waterin' the horses in the barn after dark. I don't keep a fire in the stove durin' the day, so if Barcus is scoutin' off yonder he'll see no smoke sign from the chimney. I never leave the cabin while it's daylight. If Felix Barcus or anybody else is spyin' around, this place looks deserted and the cattle starvin' for feed an' water. I look for that sidewinder to show up any time of the day or night, but I got a hunch it'll be in broad daylight. And he'll have somebody, Flapjack Meeks most likely, along for witness. When he comes, I hope to spring a little su'prise on the gent."

"I bin sick, ain't I, Horace?" Sid whispered faintly.

"Plenty sick, Sid. I had to tie you down—you went kinda wild on me. You ain't outa the woods yet, pardner, but if you say the word I'll call the deal off an' ride to Rocky Point Crossin' for help."

"Nope! You're doin' it all right, son. Play it thisaway, regardless. I'll tough it out. Now what happened to that hand of yourn?"

"I was choppin' kindlin'," lied the Magpie Kid, "in the dark. Looks like I whopped off a couple of fingers. It don't amount to much."

"I kin see that," croaked Whispering Sid, and a grin twisted his gaunt, leathery face under its white stubble of beard. "You might be a top cowhand, but you're a hell of a sorry liar, Horace."

Then Whispering Sid's eyes closed. When they opened again they were bright and glazed with fever. He croaked curses at the Magpie Kid and called him Felix Barcus.

"I got enough on you to send you to the pen right now, Felix," he raved. "I ketched Phil Hurley butcherin' a Circle Bar beef an' throwed down on him. And he squealed like a rat, Felix. He's goin' to tell the truth to the grand jury, and you'll be makin' horsehair bridles in the Deer Lodge pen before long, Felix. You and your cattle rustlin' pardner, Phil Hurley. . . ."

That went on all during the rest of the long winter night, while Horace Cowan, the tall Texan, fought his pain and tried to keep a tail holt on his own sanity.

It snowed that night while the Magpie Kid lugged his melted snow out to the horses, bucket after bucket, until he was groggy. He gulped down a stiff slug of whiskey, then scratched a peep hole on the frost-crusted window, grimly waiting with a six-shooter in his hand for the coming of Felix Barcus.

The sky cleared and the sun came out. Its glare on the white snow was blinding. It was a good day for a man to go snowblind. For two or three days and nights now, Horace Cowan had not had a solid hour's sleep. His eyes felt as if they were filled with hot sand and he'd go snowblind, for sure, if he had to stare out into that glare very long. And when he saw the moving black specks that might be men on horseback, he wasn't quite certain he was not seeing things that weren't there. Then the rider in the lead came close enough to be recognized. There was no possible mistaking that short bearskin overcoat and those rusty, orange-colored angora chaps. Nor that big bald-faced sorrel horse. It was Felix Barcus, riding his top horse, Bald Hornet.

The Magpie Kid's lips spread back in a flat grin as he fished in the pocket of his heavy wool California pants and pulled out a shiny metal badge. The words STOCK INSPECTOR were engraved on the badge. The Kid polished it with his bandaged hand, pinned it on his coat, and got to his feet.

From the bunk, Whispering Sid's blue eyes watched him, clear and bright.

"You kin untie me now, Horace." His feeble whisper was quiet, rational, but the Magpie Kid shook his head. There wasn't time. "Take it easy, Sid," he warned. "Felix Barcus just stepped into the wolf trap."

THEY could hear the big Circle Bar ramrod's loud voice, outside, calling to the men he'd fetched along.

"Look at them cattle, Meeks!" he was shouting. "Plumb starved for hay an' water. Don't look like there's a livin' human bin here in days. I tell you they was drunk when they left that 'breed dance of yourn. They rode into a big air hole in the ice, shore as hell. Or they went locoed and killed one another. You 'breed fellers git on to the barn. Tend to them horses, if they ain't dead, and to the cattle. Me'n Meeks will take a look in the cabin."

Then the big Circle Bar ramrod was pulling up in front of the cabin. The snow that had fallen during the night had covered what tracks the Magpie Kid had made between the cabin and barn and no smoke came from the cabin chimney. Felix Barcus swung from his saddle and reached for the door latch.

"What you got a gun in your hand for, Barcus?" asked Flapjack Meeks.

The door was shoved open. The light inside the cabin was dim and gray and the ramrod blinked his eyes, bulking big as a grizzly in the doorway. But even before he could see the Magpie Kid standing there with a gun in his hand, he knew he'd walked into something. The all-night fire had left the little log cabin still warm, and there was an odor of tobacco

smoke and spicy mulligan stew and blood.

"Drop your gun, Barcus!" The Magpie Kid's voice was flat-toned. "You're under arrest for cattle rustlin' and for the murder of your pardner in crime, Phil Hurley. I'm a stock detective from the Cattlemen's Association, borrowed from the Texas Rangers."

The Magpie Kid's voice was quiet, deadly. His gun was pointed straight at the burly ramrod, who had stepped back out of the doorway and bulked there in his bearskin coat and gaudy orange chaps with a six-shooter in his hand. But between Barcus and the open doorway was a strip of snow and the sunlight reflected on it threw the glare back into the Magpie Kid's eyes. Suddenly all he could see was that blinding glare; Barcus was just a hazy, indefinite blur before his eyes. He was snowblind!

Whispering Sid saw the Magpie Kid flinch, blink. He knew. But Whispering Sid was held down by a twisted cotton blanket that went around the back of his neck and crossed over his chest and under both armpits and was tied below the bunk. Only his arms and hands free.

"Toss me that gun, Horace," croaked Whispering Sid Smith. "Check the bet to ol' Sid."

Felix Barcus sensed that something was wrong, that fate or the Devil had flipped the odds to him. For the first few seconds there, gripped by fear, he had stepped back out of the cabin doorway. He had been on the verge of throwing away his gun and shoving up his hands as high as his big arms would reach. Now he gripped his six-shooter and thumbed back the hammer.

"They're locoed in that cabin! This is self-defense. You're a witness to that, Meeks!" And then, swiftly, Barcus pulled the trigger.

The bullet grazed the Magpie Kid's ribs, twisting him sideways. Then he began shooting. The best he could make out for a target was a blurred black shape that moved sluggishly and without form in a blinding red glare. But he kept triggering. And through the crashing roar of gunfire that beat against his eardrums he thought he heard Felix Barcus' heavy voice bellowing something. But he couldn't make out the words. So, crouched, his eyes tightened to narrow slits, he kept shooting until Barcus's bellowing ceased and his gun hammer was snapping down harmlessly on empty shells.

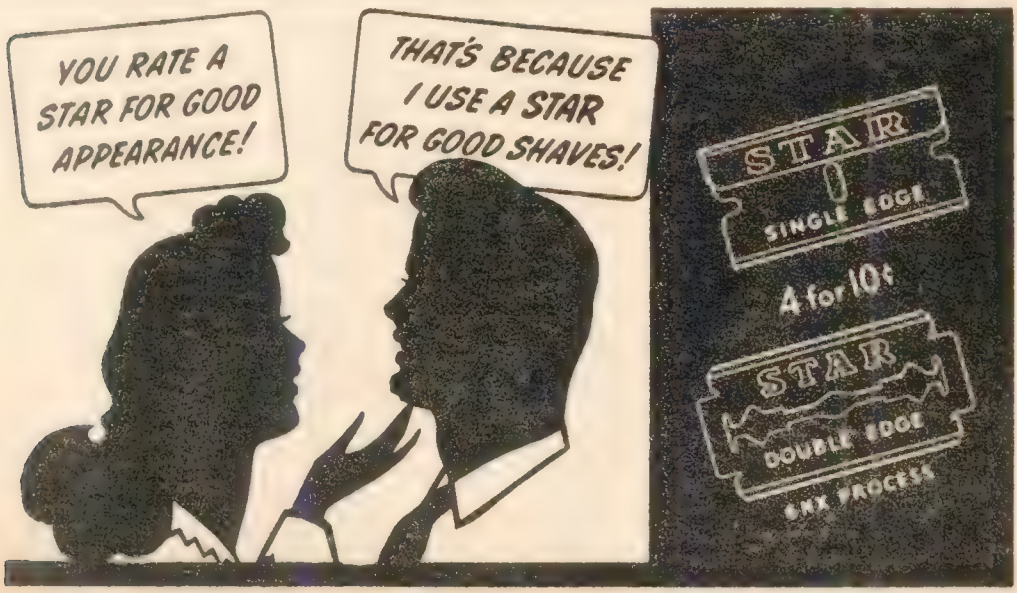
HIS ears were ringing and he was deafened by the roar of his own gun as the last echoes of it died away. Then through a vibrating silence the Magpie Kid heard the husky voice of Whispering Sid Smith.

"Looks like you got 'im, Horace."

Then Flapjack Meeks came in, cussing in a hushed voice. After that the Magpie Kid yelled for somebody to go out and chop open some water holes for the cattle, and to never mind him and Sid because nothing was wrong with them that a month's sleep wouldn't cure.

There were half a dozen husky 'breeds, and once they got the slack pulled up from their gaping jaws they got to work mighty fast. And when the cattle had quit bawling Flapjack Meeks let the Magpie Kid lift the cold, wet bandages from his eyes long enough to get a brief look at the watered, feeding cattle and the horses watered and turned loose to feed on mounds of hay scattered about.

Flapjack Meeks claimed he should be called



Doc. He bathed and dressed the young Texan's wounded hand and then made him drink a big cupful of raw whiskey.

Flapjack Meeks said that he'd found out from the 'breeds that somebody had been holed up for the past couple of weeks at the Meek's place. A horse had been stabled there, and there had been a lone man who never went out except during the night. Felix Barcus had showed up at Rocky Point Crossing early that Christmas Day and had made himself right at home, explaining he'd gotten there just too late for the dance. Barcus had said he'd just come from the home ranch to celebrate Christmas at Rocky Point Crossing. He also had said he wanted to take a look in at the Ghost Creek line camp to see how Whispering Sid and the Magpie Kid were wintering. He'd stayed drunk until this morning, but all the time had kept hinting he had a hunch they'd find something wrong at the Ghost Creek line camp when they got there. That's why he wanted Flapjack Meeks and half a dozen 'breeds to come along. He'd wanted enough men with him for a coroner's jury.

The Magpie Kid had to explain those weeks during which he had acted spooky. He had never believed in ghosts, he said, especially ghosts that rode sharpshod horses at night and made overshoe tracks under the window. Sharpshod horseshoe tracks on the ice had led back and forth from the Meeks place to the Ghost Creek line camp. Or in the direction of Meeks', as far as the Magpie Kid had cut for sign after he'd heard a prowler one night.

He'd just let Whispering Sid believe he was spooky, he explained with a lopsided grin.

"The Montana Cattlemen's Association wanted to stop cattle rustlin'," he told Sid and Flapjack. "They wanted some man who was a stranger here to do some range detective work. The Circle Bar was losin' cattle, and so were some other outfits around here. I'd bin a Texas Ranger. I'd always wanted to see this country, so I quit the Rangers and come north with a trail herd. The Association hired me at Lewistown and sent me to hire out to the Circle Bar. They had four names on the suspect list. But they'd crossed off the name of Phil Hurley and marked him dead. Felix Barcus was next on the list. Then came the names of Sid Smith and Flapjack Meeks."

STOCK INSPECTOR Horace Cowan grinned at them, and Whispering Sid nodded. He'd known he was under suspicion. Felix Barcus had made it look as though Sid Smith and Flapjack Meeks were mixed up in the wholesale cattle rustling.

"So I had to play it the way I did," the Magpie Kid explained, "and make it look like I was just a mouthy, smart-aleck bronc stomper who was a little loose-brained from too many broncs. There was times when I got sore-throated from runnin' off at the head, but it had you all fooled. And after we got into camp and I'm pumped you both dry, I knew I had only one man to handle—Felix Barcus."

His snow-blinded eyes had quit paining him now. It had been what Flapjack and Whispering Sid called only a "mild attack."

"But you done fair-to-middlin' for a snow-blind gun-slinger," said Whispering Sid. "I watched every shot hit Felix in his belly. I'd shore hate to tackle you, son, when your eyesight was really good!"

"First man I ever shot at," said Horace Cowan, "and I hope he's the last. I've got no stomach for it. I'm buyin' me a little ranch and raise horses. This place and some others Felix Barcus grabbed will come up for sheriff's sale, and I'm biddin' on 'em. Ranchers that want their land and cattle back can have 'em. This place here would suit me fine."

"I'll swap you mine for it," offered Flapjack, "and I'll sell this 'un to the Circle Bar. I got the best ranch on the river, and it ain't too far from Rocky Point Crossin'. Thataway Aggie won't git too lonesome fer her folks. But we won't be damn fool enough to bother you two. . . . What the hell am I talkin' about? Damn it, Sid, you got me drunk!"

Whispering Sid uncorked the jug Flapjack had fetched and they all took a drink. Then the Magpie Kid said if they could make a dicker with a couple of those 'breeds to stay here and feed the cattle, he and Sid would ride back to Rocky Point Crossing with Flapjack.

The tall young Texan said that he had the authority from the owners to give Whispering Sid Smith Felix Barcus's old ramrod job, and that he, Horace Cowan, would have to make a trip to Lewistown to file his report and turn in his law badge. But in a few days it would be New Year's, and now that he had laid the ghost of Phil Hurley he was going to ask Aggie to marry him, if Flapjack had no objections. He had in mind, he said, a New Year's wedding at Rocky Point Crossing—unless Aggie objected to a three-fingered cowhand.

Flapjack Meeks chuckled. He said he wasn't a sky pilot, but that he was a Justice-of-the-Peace here on the river. And as Judge Meeks he reckoned he was qualified to marry off his own daughter to any man she chose. So they drank on that, then saddled their horses and headed for Rocky Point Crossing.

It developed that Aggie had no objection whatever to marrying a three-fingered cowpuncher, and she said so in no uncertain terms. So they had a New Year's wedding and Whispering Sid Smith, ramrod for the Circle Bar, was best man. And Judge Flapjack Meeks played the fiddle—after he had tied the knot!

THE END

CASTLE IN THE CACTUS

By Roy Vandergoot

Like a great feudal palace, that fantastic edifice rises in lonely grandeur from the desolation of barren Death Valley. . . . Only Death Valley Scotty knows whence came the gold to build it, and he won't talk—except with his Winchester!

FAR up in the northern reaches of Death Valley a sandroad turns abruptly to the right to wind its way up Grapevine Canyon. About a mile up this road one sees the first of the eight-foot concrete fence posts marking the boundary of Death Valley Scotty's ranch. Two miles farther on is the Castle, a huge, two-story affair in Moorish-Spanish style. Scotty claims it cost over two million dollars—a strange dwelling amid the lonely desert solitude.

Entrance is through heavy gates over a bridge spanning a gully. In front of the main building is a swimming pool of tremendous proportions, still unfinished. The two main buildings of the Castle are two-storied. The living room in the major building has a balcony running around the room at second-story height. At one end of this huge room is a tiled fireplace, at the other end is a fountain with the water running down a rock wall made of various colored rocks picked up out of Death Valley's mountains. Doors leading from the balcony give access to bedrooms with gayly tiled baths. Here also is the organ loft, the great instrument being supplied with air from electrically driven bellows. The electricity is generated by water-power.

A tremendous chandelier hangs from the massive, beautifully carved beams. All woodwork has been carved by woodcarvers imported from Austria. The splendidly made doors, constructed on the premises, weigh five-hundred pounds each.

Back of the major building is the guest house, the two connected with walls that form a patio between them.

A rear building has a large garage and great freezing and cooling rooms. Above are more guest quarters. Each of the main buildings has a tower sporting a weathervane depicting Scotty with his burros on the trail. A clock tower, a tremendous affair, stands some distance west of the main buildings.

All buildings are of concrete with tile roofs. The outside walls are double, with space in between for insulating materials.

When the place was building, Scotty camped by himself in the Castle's huge kitchen, having moved in his bed and doing his own cooking on the great electric range, though there was a cook and swamper in the cook house providing fine meals for the many employes. With Goldfield, Nevada—the nearest town—sixty miles distant over rough desert roads, it was necessary for the workers to live on the job—a job that took five years building and is still unfinished.

Scotty's real name is Walter Scott. He is a heavily-built, blue-eyed man, habitually wearing a large-brimmed hat, white shirt and red tie—when he's dressed up. When Scotty first came to the Death Valley he worked as a water boy on the bull-team wagons hauling borax to Mojave, earning the grubstakes that made the finding of his fabulous mine possible. Rumor has it that Scotty's mine is a mirage and that Scotty's partner and co-owner of the Death Valley Ranch, Albert M. Johnson, Chicago stock broker, furnished the millions that built the Castle. Both men are easy-going, easy-met-with, easy-to-talk-to, thoroughly democratic individuals. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that Scotty knows his Valley and that he and his faithful burros tramped its scorching sands and explored its mysterious canyons and mountain ranges minutely and that many a prospector dogged their trail hoping to nose out Scotty's secret. In this they were never successful. The only metal they got out of their sleuthing was lead—from Scotty's rifle. But about that phase of his prospecting days Scotty maintains a discreet reticence.

A few years ago, Death Valley was created a National Monument, its boundaries including the Castle. Though still owned by Scotty and Johnson, it is now open to the public at a dollar a head.

★ ★ DUKE BAGLEY'S

Stade's gun roared. . . .

The famous rambling rapscallion, Duke Bagley, would either swing Boot Town's election for the Duchess, that singularly pursuasive honkytonk queen — or he would swing himself onto a waiting gallows!

CHAPTER ONE

Dead Man Tells No Tale

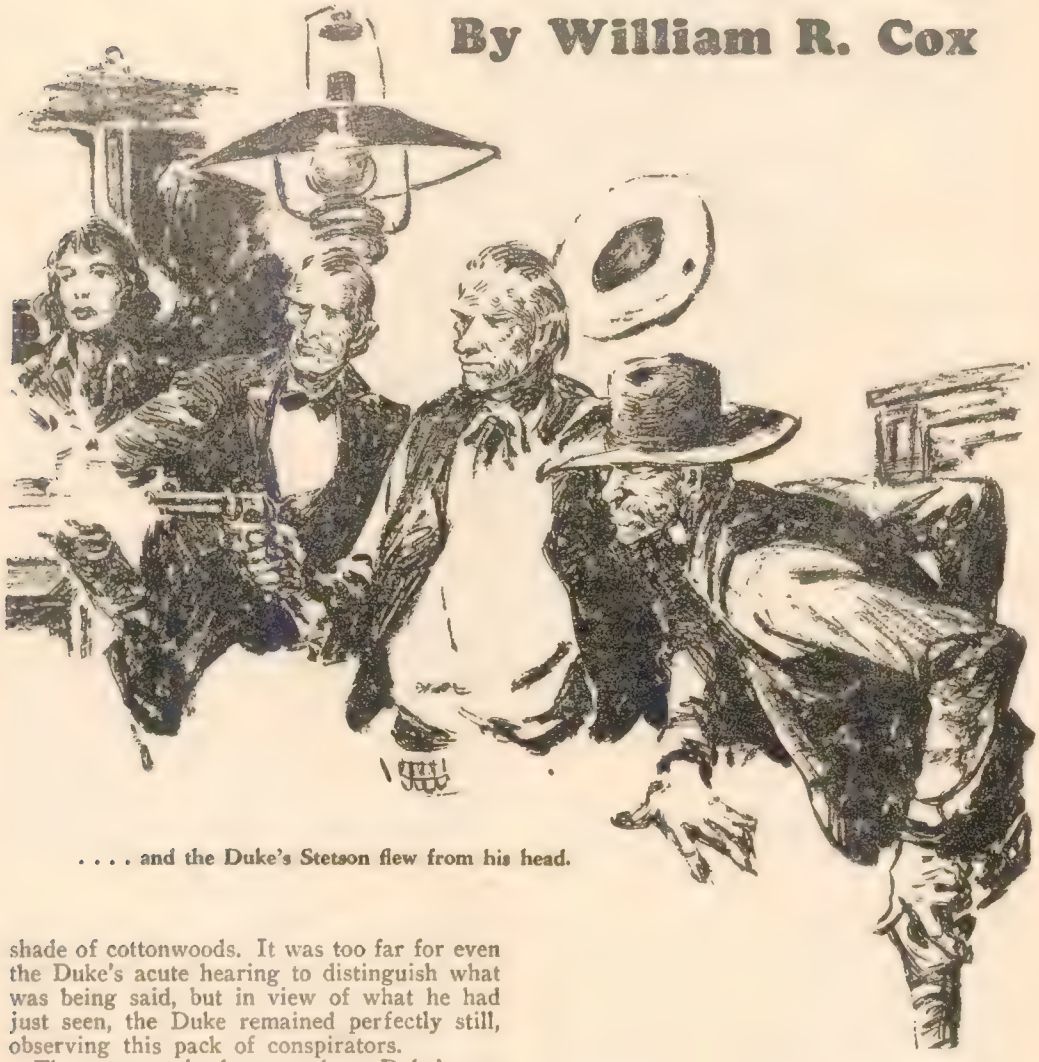
THE DUKE rode over the hill. Boot Town lay ahead, but the Duke was, with reason, avoiding the main road. Petey, the big black horse, hesitated behind a heavy copse of laurel and the Duke wiped his brow and stared down into a grassy dell.

The men were hunkered down on their heels. Their steeds were nibbling grass in the

BOOTHILL BALLOT ★

Fast Moving Frontier Novel

By William R. Cox



. . . . and the Duke's Stetson flew from his head.

shade of cottonwoods. It was too far for even the Duke's acute hearing to distinguish what was being said, but in view of what he had just seen, the Duke remained perfectly still, observing this pack of conspirators.

There was a burly man about Duke's age —in the forties—who wore a star upon his vest, an unprepossessing sheriff if Duke had ever seen one. There was a narrow-faced gray-eyed man with the look of town about him. There was an ugly, stocky, scar-faced man. There were three others, somewhat alike in their villainous looks, the sort who sometimes worked cattle, but most often their fellow-men. All save these three seemed to have a lot to say in the discussion that was going on. These men were trying to come to an agreement, Duke gathered. To Duke's mind, they were hatching a plot of some kind.

From the bush behind which Duke and Petey were hidden, a voice said in eastern accents, "There you see them, the villains of the piece. . . A mortal crew of cut-throats masquerading as decent folk. . . . Woe to Boot Town, woe to the Duchess!"

Duke Bagley whispered, "Shut up! Yon skullduggers have ears!"

"But they hear not," said the voice. A man's face emerged, slightly scratched by the thicket. It was a long, narrow, solemn face,

and free of sunburn. It had elliptical lines and crisscross wrinkles, yet the man was not over thirty, Duke guessed. "Have I not played Bach, Beethoven, Mozart to their unhearing ears, their stupid, blundering, idiotic intelligences?"

"Yaas, yaas, indeed," muttered the Duke. "A Professor, no doubt. Met your type before. Interestin'! Boot Town, you say? A Duchess! Consider, my lantern-jawed friend . . . Duchess?"

The sad eyes explored the Duke; ran over his tremendous girth, which at first glance appeared obese, but was actually beef and brawn; his bulbous, majestic nose, bearing the badge of bourbon; his slim, long, apparently useless white hands, and the fair hair, roached back from a hatless head.

"I am Homer who smites the bloomin' lyre," said the thin man. "Homer Carter, himself in person, with one complete lung. . . You, I take it, are a wandering player? Of cards, I mean, naturally."

Duke said, "I am the Duke!" as one would say, "I am your king!"

Homer Carter wrinkled his long nose. "Duke! Duke and Duchess! Oh, I say, this is too rich! You must come into my thicket and have a talk!" His eyes were sharper than Duke had first noticed. They encompassed Duke's low-slung, pearl-handled pet Colt's, his flat-heeled, hundred-dollar boots, the Stetson bought in El Paso, held in hand. He said, "You are surely not a moral man. You do not have the aura of a man who conforms. Nor could you afford those habiliments if you were a crusader for the Right."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. Quite a spiel. Always thought I was pretty good myself, 'til now. . . ."

Homer Martin said, "Look yonder. Behold the High Sheriff, Jake Stade. A lovely character. The Duchess rejected him, and now he hates her. . . . The gray-eyed chap is D. D. Dedham, known as 'Ded,' which he is, from the neck up. A moral fellow, leader of the women and milksops of Boot Town. . . . The scarred one is Taos Pete Shugrue, bad man, owner of the Apache Bar, business rival of the Duchess. He hates her, too. The three Horrors, German Herman, Drag Fyfe, Longhorn Beck, are leaders of a motley crew of thugs and men who have been personally thrown from the Duchess Saloon by—the Duchess."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. . . The Duchess. People don't like her, you say? What sort of Duchess is she?"

"Fair!" said Homer Martin. "Not too young, not too old. Hair like spun gold, eyes cerulean as a summer sky. Weight, one-thirty-five. But square, stranger, square. . . That is a western word I have taken up."

"Yaas, square," said Duke. "These gents don't cotton to her, so they aim to bust her up, eh? Moral stuff, plus strong-arm, eh?"

"You, Duke, are a perspicacious gentleman," bowed Homer Martin. "I hope you are coming to Boot Town. I will play Brahms for you."

"Yaas," said Duke. "The funeral march thing? Afraid of that!"

"THERE'LL be funerals," said the strange, thin man. "Mine, for one." Suddenly he seemed about to cough. Color came to his face; he strangled and clapped a hand over his mouth. The sound would surely attract the crew below. Duke reached with his white hands. He seized the man, lifted him easily, placed him in the saddle atop Petey. Then he mounted behind with the agility of a ballet master. The horse turned on the soft turf and went noiselessly toward the main road from which Duke had deviated when he found the body. . . .

Out of earshot of the party in the glade, Homer Martin coughed vigorously. He said, "I have a horse staked out back yonder, my Duke."

Duke said, "Under them cottonwoods? Waal, that's somethin'."

He took the turning back eastward. There was a stream and a row of trees. A horse whinnied and Petey answered with dignity. . .

Duke slid down over Petey's tail and pointed. "Mebbe you know this feller?"

The man's head was in the water. He wore a checkered shirt and working pants and boots. His spurs were rusty and his boot heels run over, but all had been of good quality. Homer Martin for once had no words to utter. He went close, unwillingly, a step at a time. He did not touch the corpse, or turn it over to look at the face.

He straightened and said, somewhat dully, "That was Dick Regan. Last night he won every cent I had in the world at poker. We quarrelled; we were both drunk. We threatened each other."

"Yaas, indeed. Fine!" said Duke. "Now you and your friend, the Duchess, are both in trouble."

Martin said, "They want me out of the way. Can we do anything?"

"Waal," the Duke deliberated. "Maybe, if we have time." He could act quicker than any man Homer Martin had ever seen. He was hoisting the corpse on the back of the patient, long-suffering Petey. The man had been young, full-bodied, but Duke handled him with ease. He had been stabbed, not shot, Duke noted. The wound was on the back, as though he had been drinking from the stream, slaking a hangover thirst, when the attacker leaped upon him.

Duke took time to note a heavy limb which could have served as a taking-off spot for the murderer. He had seen pumas utilize such a limb when stalking deer. . . . It made an evil impression upon him, that scene: The rippling, innocent stream; the low-hanging, graceful branch; the unsuspecting young man. And the murderer who chose a knife to a good, clean bullet. . . .

He led Petey up the stream, and Homer Martin followed. Presently Duke left the water and brought up at an abandoned squatter's shack in a clearing. He rummaged around and found a broken spade. Surveying it with distaste, he said, "Yaas, can you dig? But no, your condition."

He found a soft spot in the wods. He dug. It was terrible. He wore gloves, but a blister developed. It was on his right hand and he remembered swear words from the River, from lumber camps and dusty branding corrals. He used them all.

But he buried Dick Regan and covered the place like an Indian hiding a cache. He came out and stared at Homer Martin and said, "Yaas. . . . This Duchess better be good. You better be good. A blister on my hand! Pah!"

Homer said, "You are a man of parts, Duke. I took occasion to search poor Dick while you were working. The money is gone. There was five hundred—plus his wages from the Cross Key Ranch."

DUKE said, "Too bad. We could have used it. However, let us go to Boot Town. Men will be searching for you. Tell them you came to meet me. I am your friend from St. Louis. You've been to St. Louis?"

"I played the Opera House there," said Homer with dignity.

"I played the faro houses," said Duke, grimly. "Did very well, too. Yaas. . . . We met there. You knew I was coming. Been together all mornin', eh? Ridin' in."

"An alibi," nodded Homer. "It sounds good."

"It *better* be good," said Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Rope neckties are most unbecoming my hasty, well-intentioned friend."

They rode a wide circle, covering their tracks. Finally they came to the road eastyard of the creek and cantered easily along. When they reached the stream, there was a welcoming party. . . .

Sheriff Jake Stade had a heavy jaw and was pugnacious. He held up his hand, stopping the pair. He said, "Homer, you seen Dick Regan t'day?"

"I'm alive, aren't I?" countered Homer. "You heard him threaten me last night. I don't carry a gun, you know. If I saw Dick, I would take myself to far places, pronto."

"He come on this road," said Stade with a stubborn insistence. "He never reached the Cross Key."

Duke was looking over the newcomer to the group. All the others he had already catalogued to his own satisfaction as Homer had tallied them. They were a precious crew —but they were recognizable rascals, within Duke's understanding.

This new man, this owner of the Cross Key Ranch, was not a big man, neither was he small. He was medium of size, with medium brown hair and eyes and skin. He had careful hands, which could roll a cigarette, hold the reins of his mount, or kill a man without trembling. He was quiet, but his eyes were too quick. . . .

Duke said, "Your friend never came on this road today, not the way we came. No, indeed . . . didn't nobody ride thataway." His hand went to the pocket of his shirt. Three red balls came into his fingers. He juggled them in a small circle. They leaped in the sun, so that everyone watched, fascinated. They went back to his hand, became four balls, then three again, then two, then they disappeared altogether. Only the owner of the Cross Key did not hang his mouth open slackly, watching.

He said, instead, "You're Duke Bagley. . . . I'm Dan Cross."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. . . . Thought you was Cross."

Dan Cross said, "You won't be stayin' around long."

"No indeed," said Duke pleasantly. "Never do, somehow. More of a wanderer type. . . ."

Sheriff Stade looked from one man to the other. Homer had been forgetton, now. Stade said, "You want this man arrested, Dan?"

"Arrested?" Cross looked faintly contemptuous. He said, "You're all damned fools; I'll find Dick myself. Go back to town and play cards with Bagley. That's about your level of intelligence."

He urged his horse past them, not bothering to look back, and went towards Boot Town, alone.

Duke murmured, "Yaas, indeed. . . . Very rugged feller. Should we follow him, Homer, my old friend?"

They went, and no one attempted to stop them, least of all the bumbling Sheriff. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

"Get Out of Town, Duke!"

BOOT TOWN was no inconsiderable place, Duke found. There were many clapboard houses, a large settlement of Mexicans in adobe shacks, two streets boasting business establishments. The Duchess Saloon was two

stories high. . . . a highly imposing edifice.

Homer Martin said, "Now who could have knifed Dick Regan? He was a quiet fellow, except in his cups. Dan Cross was fond of Dick, and Dan Cross is a dangerous man. Cross Keys is the biggest ranch in this country."

Duke tied Petey carefully to the rack before the Duchess Saloon. He said, "Yaas, indeed. But let us repair to the coolness of the inn and the presence of some bourbon."

They went inside. The Duchess had a touch, all right. The place was immaculate. The gaming tables were polished, the mahogany bar sported a rack of shining tumblers built in a pyramid, the floors were sanded and scrubbed. Upon a dais sat a small piano, also shining. Dan Cross leaned upon the bar, alone, whiskey untouched in a glass before him.

Behind the bar was a woman. She was tall and her shoulders were wide, but the column of her neck was superb. She wore a red shirt, like a man's, but she did not in any way seem masculine. Her nose was aquiline and strong, her lips full, her cheeks round and healthy and her eyes bluer than blue. She said in a clear, cool voice, "You know Homer wouldn't kill Dick. . . Here they are now. Speak your mind, Dan!"

Duke stepped away from Homer just a little as the owner of Cross Key hitched around to stare at them. His hands went to his belt and he sagged a little, like a fat man wearied from riding.

Dan Cross said softly, "Don't get ready to draw on me, Bagley. When I come after you, I'll get you without any risk to my hide. You've butted into something, and I reckon you mean taking a hand where you're not concerned—like always. I'm warning you, Bagley. Regan was nobody but I don't cotton to murder—unless there's a mighty good reason for it. You're alibiing Homer, and that don't go with me noways atall. I know you, Bagley, from away back."

Duke said gently, "Yaas? Indeed! Seen me afore, have you, Cross?"

The rancher shrugged. "Mebbe. But I know about you."

"Yaas," said Duke. "Indeed!" The two words indicated deepest doubt. Duke waited, holding his breath. If the man took up the implied insult, a lot of future trouble might be avoided.

For a moment it seemed that Dan Cross would do just that. His elbow jerked once. Duke did not budge. Then Cross lifted his full whiskey glass and drained it very slowly. He bowed to the Duchess, then walked straight out of the bar without another glance at Duke or Homer Carter.

Homer exploded, "I thought he would do it! He was set to draw! Duchess, this is Duke Bagley, who befriended me today."

The woman came from behind the bar. She wore boots and a skirt too short for propriety, yet there was nothing of the fallen woman in any aspect of her, Duke recognized. She said in a low voice, "We've got to talk, if you're in on this, Bagley. Something bad is brewing in this town."

Duke said, "We'll talk. . . But first, my dear Duchess, may we imbibe? After so narrow an escape as we have had from bullets, a bit of bourbon?"

She said impatiently, "I hate drinking men."

"A quart," sighed Duke. "Just to wet the whistle."

He helped himself from the stock behind the bar. The blue eyes of the woman flashed indignantly, met those of Homer, dropped behind long-lashed lids. Finally she led the way through a door beside the bar and into a hall. Steps went up to a sort of second floor sitting room. She had furnished it with buffalo robes, Navajo blankets, Mexican pottery and trinkets upon low tables. It was perfectly charming, Duke thought. He poured his whiskey and drank, wondering about this woman in this cattle town. . . .

SHE said, "The better Mexicans, a few old-timers are with me. I have two dealers, Homer, and a bartender. Dan Cross will not go against me, but the rest want me out. They're starting some kind of political reform movement, with an election coming up this week. I could haul stakes, but I like it here." She gestured at her comfortable quarters. "My games are square. I sell good liquor. . . ."

"Yaas, indeed," Duke nodded, swallowing the bourbon. "Excellent!"

She said, "Are you a gunman? A gambler? A crook?"

"Yaas, indeed," nodded Duke. "A bit of each, perhaps."

Homer cried, "He's a quick, understandin' fellow! He is not afraid, not even of Dan Cross!"

She said, "I will pay you two hundred dollars per month. The wages of an honest Marshal—top wages. You act as my house man. But you refrain from dishonesty while you work for me."

"He can sleep in my room," added Homer quickly, " and eat with us. He entertains me, Duchess."

Her face was stony. "I don't care where he sleeps off his drunks. I want some sort of protection."

"Yaas," nodded Duke. "Yaas, indeed!" For once he was flush. There were several thousand in his money belt right now. He

did not need wages—he detested wages. They cramped his style. His way was to venture his capital and gamble on profits. . . .

He said, "I imagine you could be a charming woman. Yaas, indeed! However, running such a place! Yaas, Duchess, the Duke will work for you!"

He swallowed bourbon to the extent of a pint, saving the rest of the bottle for later. The red balls came out and despite the blister he juggled for awhile, thinking hard. The Duchess said impatiently, "A mountebank and drunkard. . . Homer, if I've made a mistake, on your head be it!" And she went angrily downstairs. She was a sturdy woman, and the stairs shook under her high-heeled boots.

Homer said, "I'd better go down and play for the afternoon crowd—and watch. I am the eyes. You are the brain. The Duchess hates drunkards—another reason for her unpopularity with the local yokels. . . ."

Duke murmured, "You are in love with her, of course. Yaas, indeed! Well, go ahead, my young friend. I will linger a short while in this pleasant room. Then, to work! Yaas. . . . ."

He essayed to make the red balls become four, then one. It was his most difficult trick, and the blister interfered. One of the balls fell and rolled into a corner. Sighing, he took his bulk after it, kneeling and reaching beneath a cabinet of bric-a-brac. He recovered the ball, but something cold and sharp seemed hidden in a corner, up against the wall.

He drew forth a knife. It was a plain hunting knife, without initials or distinguishing marks. Upon the blade was a rusty stain. . . . It was a knife which could have slid into the back of Dick Regan, out there under the cottonwood tree, beside the burbling brook. . . .

He wrapped the knife carefuly and put it under his shirt. Then he went into the hall and found a back stairway. A negro boy was wiping down a bay horse in the stable.

Duke said, "The Duchess have a nice ride, boy?"

"Hahd ride," the boy grinned. "Old bay all latheh. . . ."

The Duke said, "Buy yourself a house—a brick house, and he flipped the boy a coin. "Brick houses last longer. . . . " He strolled into the stable and spoke to Petey, who was munching a feed of oats. He found a feed bin almost full and buried the knife in it.

Dick Regan had quarrelled with Homer, and probably with the Duchess. Both Homer and the Duchess had been out that morning, riding the countryside. Regan was knifed in the back. If the Duchess couldn't climb a cottonwood, Duke was a hare-brained nincompoop. Homer could easily have performed the deed before he spied upon the Duchess's local enemies. . . .

It could be, Duke admitted, but he was going to proceed on the theory that it was not true. He wanted to learn who would attempt to appropriate the knife beneath the cabinet upstairs. . . . If it was Jake Stade or one of his cohorts, all would be well. The Duke had handled men like Jake Stade before. . . .

HE WENT into the bar and poured his bourdon into a glass beneath the scowling eye of the Duchess and her bartender. Homer was playing softly upon the piano. The music was strange to Duke, but he knew it was very good music. It was the kind that got inside a man and made him think—sometimes of things which he would rather have forgotten, but always the Duke would stand and listen to such music. . . . Homer, the sick man, could make that piano say things.

After awhile Duke went out into the twilight. He walked all over Boot Town before dark, although he hated walking. His quick mind made a map of every street, every establishment of importance. He found the Apache Bar across from the Duchess Saloon, and in the next block. . . .

It was an entirely different sort of place, all right. It was a roaring, ripping, filthy hangout. Taos Pete had German Herman, Drag Fyfe and Longhorn Beck watched the games with guns in plain sight. The rag-tag and bobtail of Boot Town lapped up raw whiskey and was drunk. Nothing was concealed and Sheriff Stade openly was campaigning for himself and Ded Dedham, the latter for Mayor. Not that Dedham was present in the saloon. He was in his office, above the general store, which he owned.

Here, Duke realized, were enough votes to swing any election in Boot Town. Dedham could handle enough of the "decent" people to win through such support as he got here. With the women folks and the gutter rats both against her, the Duchess had no chance. Duke listened, attempting to learn who was running against Dedham. It turned out to be a man named August Smith, a feed store operator, a nonentity. And probably a cohort of Dedham's.

While he stood there he felt them ganging up on him, but made no attempt to prevent it. He was at the end of the bar. German Herman, a giant with a round head and dull, stupid eyes, came up on one side of him. Drag Fyfe and Longhorn Beck, wry-necked, bandy-legged ex-riders, ranged on the other side. Behind the bar, Taos Pete edged near a sawed-off shotgun.

Then Stade moved toward him. The Sheriff's bulldog face was hard. He said, "Bagley, if thet's yore name, I want words with you."

"Yaas, obviously," said Duke, eyeing the men who surrounded him.

"We know Dick Regan was on the east road today, and we happen to know he had money on him. We cain't find him, but someone did. We got information he was kilt. . . ."

Duke said, "Never knew any Regans. What do you want of me, Sheriff?"

"I want you outa town," said Stade flatly. "By sunrise. We are gonna clean up this burg, and you ain't any help. You be gone, or there'll be trouble and you'll be in it!"

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed." He shoved against the bar. They were so close-packed about him that when he made a quick backward step he was completely clear, leaving them all bunched. He made the doorway before any one of them moved.

Standing there, crouching a little, he was like a great, good-natured bear. He smiled at them and said, "Seems like you are perturbed about this Regan. Okay, gents, I'll take on the job of findin' out who killed him. And I'll be here tomorrow mornin'. You've named your hand and I'm callin' you. Yaas, indeed, there'll be trouble—and the Duke'll be in it."

They could have got him, easily. There were enough of them and he had only one gun, in its holster. But they did not move. They wavered, and he stepped outdoors and padded down the street toward the Duchess saloon. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Who Killed Regan?

THE Duchess said, "You're sober. That's strange."

They sat in her room upstairs. Duke ignored the remark and said blandly, "You sleep in yonder, eh? And Homer down the hall? You ain't heard anyone sneakin' around here in the night or day?"

"The stairs run two ways," said the Duchess. "People come and go. I've never been suspicious until lately."

Duke said, "*H'mmm.* . . . Found the knife that did for Dick Regan under yore cabinet yonder."

There was silence in the room and from downstairs came the sound of Homer playing Buffalo Gals. The Duchess got up and walked the length of the room and back. Her voice was tighter, deeper, when she spoke. "You have a curious way about you, Duke. What do you make of all this?"

"Too many men in love with you," said Duke. "Stade, Dedham, Homer. . . . Dan Cross."

"Dan Cross?" She seemed really perplexed. "He's a cold fish. He loves cattle—and money. Not Dan Cross."

"Who ever had trouble with Dick Regan?"

"Nobody I know about," she said. "He was a quiet one. Cross thought a lot of him, but Regan never seemed much to me."

"Then mebbe he was murdered to put Cross against you," said Duke. "And to get rid of Homer—by lynchin'. Not nice, not nice atall."

"If you could only prove that!" she said sharply.

"Can't." Duke said.

"But something must be done! I won't be chased out of town by such as Stade and Dedham!" she cried. "I run a decent place."

"You're a woman," said Duke, "in a man's business. Neither sex likes that. Who is August Smith?"

"A little dummy," she said exasperatedly. "A nothing!"

"Waal, waal," Duke said. "Got t' make a real issue. Got to control the 'lection. *You'll* run for Mayor!"

"Are you a complete fool?" she demanded. "Who would vote for me?"

"Your bartender, your dealers, Homer, mebbe Dan Cross and his riders . . . must be considerable of 'em," said Duke.

"Pooh!" she said. "That's not enough to scratch!"

"The Mexican-Americans," said Duke. "They like you."

"They can't vote! Stade doesn't allow it!" she said scornfully. "You should know Texas well enough for that!"

"Stade," said Duke. "Yaas, indeed. Stade mustn't be allowed to handle the 'lection, eh, my little chickadee?"

She said, "Don't address me in such a manner, Bagley! Stade is a crook, but he is the elected Sheriff. Dan Cross himself put Stade in office."

"Ahhh?" said Duke, his voice rising for the first time. "He did? Waal, waal! Dan Cross, eh? H'mmm. . . ."

"Dan is no crook," she said vehemently. "He's hard, and stingy in some ways. But he's honest enough."

Duke said, "Yaas, indeed. We shall see . . . we shall see. You're sure Cross and Regan were firm friends, eh, my pet?"

"I'm not your pet!" she snapped. "I want no part of you. If you can't keep a decent tongue in your head—"

Duke said, "So Dan Cross isn't in love with you, eh, my fire-eating Duchess of Boot Town? But you wish he was, eh?"

"He's a man!" she snapped. "In all this county, he is the only damned he-man I know of!"

SHE was immediately confused because she had admitted so much. If she had realized that Homer Carter had ceased playing and was even then on the stairs, one narrow hand against his side, listening with pale face, she

would have felt worse, the Duke thought. He got up and closed the door and leaned against it, to allow the sick man to go to his room unseen.

"You are mistaken," he said, and for the first time his voice was sharp, incisive. "Like all women. . . . Yaas, indeed. You never see what is beneath your nose. Stade has given me until sunrise to decamp, my forthright little female boss. I could easily shoot it out with him, kill him. But it would gain you nothing. Therefore I am leaving. I am visiting the Cross Key tomorrow."

She said, "You are leaving. . . ?"

"You will announce, through Homer, that you are a candidate for the office of Mayor," Duke said bluntly. "Homer will go down and see the leading Mex and talk with him secretly —make arrangements to vote all the Mexicans. When I learn who killed Dick Regan and why the knife was planted on you, we shall hold this election our way. . . . Otherwise, you can make ready to ride out of Boot Town!"

She said, "That's nonsense, Bagley! Who are you to come in here and tell me—"

He came close to her. She was tall, but he was six feet four. He said coldly, "I'm the man who hid Regan's body. I'm the man who has taken a fancy—not to you, my muddle-headed Duchess—but to Homer Carter. I could have you arrested tomorrow. Instead, I choose to run you for mayor of Boot Town. Think of that, my fair-haired saloon-keeping young lady, until you see me again!"

With that, he went down the hall and found the room of the piano player. The Duchess stood quite still, her face flushed with rage. The color died slowly in her cheeks. She took a step toward the cabinet of bric-a-brac, then went out of the room and downstairs into the bar. . . .

Homer lay upon the bed and said bitterly, "I heard her. . . And she is right. I'm only half a man."

Duke said, "Waal, you ain't got your strength. But I've heard worse coughin'. You do like I say and carry a gun while you're doin' it. Nemmine the Duchess—she's a strange woman. You get that Mex vote ready."

"If you vote them, you'll start a rebellion in Texas!" said Homer.

"They're citizens," said Duke, grimly. "Our gang will not throw a vote for Smith, which will split the others a bit, mebbe. If Dan Cross comes through. . . ."

"That man's deadlier than a snake," said Homer. "He's colder than an iceberg. He will not aid anyone."

Duke said, "He put Stade in office. You should've told me that. Things like that make a difference. Yaas, indeed. . . ." He clapped a hand on Homer's bony shoulder, a rare gesture for the Duke. "You forget what the Duchess said and do like I say. A man's got to be a man fer his own sake."

Then he went down the back stairs. The huge form of German Herman tried to hide itself in the stable's dimness. . .

Duke pretended to be going to the corral. Getting into line with the stable door, he executed a swift flanking maneuver and went whirling through the door like an avalanche. His Colt was in his right hand. German Herman was near Petey's stall.

Duke's left hand clutched the giant's gun wrist. He right-handed the gun in a short arc. German Herman's stupid face was in the way. The gun sight ripped his skin; the heavy muzzle knocked him unconscious. . . .

Duke said, "Pete, you been workin' overtime lately. . . ." He saddled the horse and draped Herman over the saddle. On the next street, in darkness, he pushed Herman into the gutter and left him there. . . .

Petey did not seem to mind. He cantered out of town, full of oats and willingness, on the road to Cross Key Ranch.

THE moon was shining when they came to the small river. The cottonwoods stretched ghostly arms across the water. It was a spot

the Duke never would forget. It was perfectly beautiful in every aspect, yet it was laden with the special horror of assassination, of a dastardly attack from behind upon an unsuspecting man. The Duke dismounted and came slowly to the ford, leading the black horse.

From behind the tree of the low-hanging limb came a steady voice, "Hold it, Bagley!"

Duke dropped Petey's rein and stood with the moon full on him. "Yaas, indeed. . . . Expected you'd be out ridin', Dan."

The man came into sight, holding the gun steady, its muzzle undeviatingly upon Duke's middle. He said, "You know me."

"Why shore, Dan," said Duke mildly. "Knew you right off. But I didn't put your right name on you—like you did to me!"

"I won't pay blackmail!" Dan Cross said. "You hear me, Bagley!"

Duke said, "Better put up yore gun, Dan."

"I won't pay it! I got a big spread. I'm goin' straight." The man was aroused. "I'm harmin' no one. And by Godfrey, I'm holdin' onto what I've got."

Duke said, "Figgered you were payin' someone. . . . It made things work out when I stopped t' think. Yaas. . . . Regan, huh?"

Dan Cross barked, "None of your business!"

"Better put up yore gun," Duke said easily. "Knew you wouldn't cotton to a coot like Regan—a drunk, a gambler and talker who'd fight with Homer Carter over cards. . . Don't make sense. You was a cool one, Dan, when you ran with the wild bunch."

"I paid him," said the man with the gun. "But I'm not payin' you nor any other son from those days, not no more!"

Duke said, "Regan got murdered, right here, where I'm standin'. His face was in the water. Was you afraid he'd talk anyhow, sometime, when he was drunk?"

"I didn't kill him!" Dan Cross said. "But I'd like to know who did."

Duke said, "Dan, I got a li'l hide-out gun in my hand. I coulda shot you on the spot. You wanta start somethin' or put up that hog-leg and talk?"

He lifted his left hand and the rancher could see the ugly, short-snouted weapon which had been snug in Duke's sleeve. The moon shone impartially upon them and either man could have started shooting with equal chance of winning out.

DAN CROSS said bitterly, "I know better than to give you an even break and start somethin'. But I won't pay blackmail again!" He holstered his gun and made a gesture at the water. "Can't a man wash hisself clean by goin' straight? Can't a man have no life, once he's been off the trail? You been on the dodge, Bagley. Supposin' you wanted to settle down, have yore own home, your own spread. . . . Wouldn't you figger to fight for it?"

Duke said, "Why shore, Dan . . . I ain't quarrellin' with you. I just happened along."

Dan Cross said, "Whoever killed Regan knew somethin' about him and his past. . . . He was in the gang with me, for a short while, after your time. Why did he get killed? Who's workin' ag'in me in this country?"

Duke said, "I ain't quite on to it, yet, Dan, but I got somethin' started. I got the Duchess to run fer Mayor. And now I want a candidate for Sheriff."

"Stade's a dummy, but he's all right," said Dan shortly.

"You mean he's a crook and you put him there, thinkin' he couldn't turn you in, ever," said Duke. "I'm on to thet much."

Dan said, "The Duchess wouldn't get six votes."

"How many riders you got, Dan?" asked Duke.

"A dozen," said Dan. "What good are they?"

"Your riders'd be fighters," Duke said. "I got Regan planted in the woods. I got the knife he was killed with. Gimme a friendly sheriff and I'll turn up his murderer."

"Mebbe I don't want him turned up," muttered Dan Cross.

"Then you ain't straight, and you can't expect to lead a quiet life." The Duke shrugged. "Man, you can't live two ways at once!"

"The Duchess! Runnin' fer Mayor! It's ridiculous," Dan Cross fumed. "I can't think of no friendly sheriff—except Homer Carter! That would be a pay-off!"

"I was hopin' you'd mention him," Duke said calmly. "Now that we got a ticket, we only got to elect 'em."

"I can't afford no gun-election," said Dan Cross. "I tell you I'm tryin' to live quiet!"

Duke said, "You got to earn the kind of life you wanta live, Dan. You've held up a few banks and killed a few men in yore day. You can't jest wipe it off the slate—you got to think of other folks once in awhile."

Dan said bitterly, "The hell with them!"

"The Mexicans are goin' to vote in this election," said Duke sternly, "and you're goin' to help vote 'em. Or else, Dan!"

The man's whole body seemed to tighten. He said, "Don't push me with no loco schemes, Duke Bagley. I know you can out-gun a Bill Hickok. But by God, I kin die!"

"You will, too, if you ain't smart," said Duke serenely. "Light and set awhile, Dan. Leave us make a talk. . . ."

Reluctantly, Dan Cross hunkered down. The Duke selected a spot beneath a tree, in heavy shadow.

They talked. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Funeral Arrangements!

ELECTION day dawned gray. In the early morning Stade and Dedham had a parade. August Smith tended his store and did nothing. Stade went roaring about town, threatening anyone who would vote for Homer or the Duchess with dire things.

There was no sign of the Duke or Dan Cross. Both had been very busy, under cover of dark, but neither showed himself to the enemy. In the Mexican quarter all was quiet. . . .

The Duchess said, "This is unbelievable. Where is that fat rascal? We might as well get ready to move—or fight!"

Homer played Beethoven, very softly. He had a gun in his pocket, but otherwise he had not spruced himself up for the election. He said, "I have a great and shining confidence in the Duke."

She said, "We could open in Harperville. It's a coming spot."

"Thou woman of little faith!" Homer said.

"What do I know about being a Mayor?" she said impatiently. "Bagley has made a fool of me. He has run away and left us holding a pretty bag."

The polling booth was in the Apache Saloon, of course. Stade declared the lists open and men filed in, lining up, laughing. Someone voted for the Duchess and a roar went up as the vote was summarily challenged and thrown out. A swarthy Mexican boy brought the news, and Homer said, "We won't need that one."

The Duchess said, "Perhaps we should make a fight. My dealers are all right. I'd kill Stade as quick as a fly if I thought—"

Homer said quietly, "If you thought what, my dear?"

"Nothing," she said, coloring. "I'm just talking."

Homer said, "Someone killed Regan like that—as though he were not a human being. Someone leaped upon him and stabbed him without giving him a chance. . . . I wonder who? I wonder if the Duke knows?"

"He wouldn't care!" she said sharply. "He is a rogue. Why he bothered to accept my offer I cannot imagine. A man like Bagley does not work for wages."

Homer said, "He is one of those souls who misses, somehow, being truly great—but not by a large margin. I have never met such a man as Duke Bagley. He knows who killed Regan, by now."

"You're a fool, Homer!" she cried. Then she turned and stared at the thin man on the piano bench. She said quickly, "You are not a fool. You are ill, Homer, but you are far from stupid. What am I going to do, Homer?"

There was a wail in her voice. Homer stopped his hands upon the keys, watching her. He had never seen her like this before. Now she was completely feminine, and her eyes were moist. She was appealing to him, and for a moment he paused to enjoy a thing he felt he would never experience again.

Then he said, "Trust the Duke . . . Hark!"

There was a sound of horses. A cloud of dust rose in the sky. The line in front of the Apache Bar shifted, turned to watch. Stade came from within and stood on the walk, shading his eyes. Dedham, gray and furtive, peered from the window. The voting stopped.

Then Stade bellowed, "It's only Dan Cross and his men! Git this thing over, quick. I'll close the damn polls at noon!"

Behind him a voice said sonorously, "Not until everyone has had his chance to vote, my thick-headed sheriff!"

STADE whirled. The Duke was afoot, and his gun was shifted forward on his huge flank. Behind him was a procession.

Dan Cross came in, quiet, stern-eyed. His dozen riders flung themselves down from their horses and formed behind him. They were young, tough, eager for fight or frolic. Everyone knew the Cross Key bunch. . . .

Stade yelled, "No damned greasers kin vote in this town!"

The Duke held forth a piece of paper. He said, "Opinion of the Attorney General. . . . Begs the question a bit, to be sure—leaves it up to the local voting authorities whether a Mex citizen kin vote. Yas, indeed. . . ."

"I'm the authority!" Stade said, swelling his chest.

"H'mmm," said the Duke, and grinned. Behind him, a couple of hundred brown-skinned men grinned also. "How 'bout it, Dan?"

The owner of the Cross Key stepped to the door of the Apache Bar. He said, "We don't want no trouble, Jake. We put you in, and now we're puttin' you out. Step aside and open them polls!"

Stade said, "Dan, you can't do this! What have I ever done to you? I'm yore friend, Dan!"

Even German Herman stepped aside, though. Duke marched in and said: "I ain't a citizen of Boot Town, but these folks are. They got idees of their own. Yaas, indeed!"

The Mexicans filed in silently. They could all make a cross and had been thoroughly coached. The Duke watched them pridefully. In his time he had stolen many things—but this was his first shot at pilfering an election. . . .

Down the street came Homer, escorting the Duchess. The candidates for office were smiling, their heads high. They marched past the

Duke, and each made him a bow. Stade bawled, "This stranger was warned outa town, Dan, and now you're a-sidin' him! This ain't right! We got rights on our side, too!"

"You keep talkin' about right," said Dan Cross evenly. "Who killed Dick Regan?"

"Thet's it!" exclaimed Jake. "Mebbe Homer Carter did it! Mebbe the Duchess her own self. . . . Mebbe this damn' Bagley."

Duke elbowed into the stout sheriff's ribs. He said, "Careful, my foul-mouthed friend."

The voting went on smoothly under the watchful eyes of the Cross Key men, and Dan himself tallied the returns. There was no doubt of the result. Boot Town had a lady mayor and a sheriff with one lung!

Stade and Dedham and Taos Pete were left with the voting booth and their sorrows. The entire criminal element remained with them. Dan led the Cross Key men across lots to the Duchess Saloon and free liquor began to flow.

But upstairs the four main plotters sat and conferred. The Duchess said confusedly, "I don't know which way to begin. . . . What does a Mayor do?"

"Nothin'," said Duke, comfortably. "No politician does anything."

Dan Cross said, "There's enough of them over there to start a whale of a riot, Duke. When they get drunk, it's gonna be bad."

"Yaas," said Duke. "Got to stop 'em."

"Duke will find a way," said Homer. He was polishing a five-pointed star he had found somewhere. He still had the gun in his pocket, but tomorrow he would buy a worn holster and practise drawing the weapon.

"Seems like you oughta turn up Regan's killer," said Duke, "as a starter."

"Correct!" said Homer, cheerfully. "Who did it, Duke?"

The Duke said, "Waal, might be a good thing to send word to the Apache Bar thet we know who did it."

HE THOUGHT he heard movement on the back stairs. He had carefully left them open, unguarded. He went on, "Homer kin make the arrest. . . . Be impressive, so soon after election."

Dan Cross said tightly, "Duke, you better be sure! There'll be a lynchin', you know. Dick was murdered from behind."

"Yaas," said Duke. "But we gotta chance thet."

Dan said reluctantly, "I'll send one of my boys over and have him let it drop we know who did it."

"Also that we have the corpse and the weapon," said Homer. "The only thing missing is my money that Dick won."

"Yaas," said Duke. "Five hundred odd dollars. . . A goodly sum."

The Duchess said nervously, "We must be very sure. Someone will die today, because of us."

Dan Cross said, "The day's wearin' on. . . . I better send that man over."

"No need," said Duke. "The one who was listenin' to us already went—heard him pussyfootin' off. Other night I found German Herman out there, pokin' around the stable. Stade's got a spy over here all the time."

Dan Cross said, "You do things a funny way, Duke."

"Yaas," said Duke. He sipped bourbon from a tumbler. "It's the life I lead. . . ."

Dan said, "I got work at the ranch. I got a shipment to get ready. . . ."

Duke went on as though he had not heard, "This Regan, now. He was in a wild bunch one time; not much of a feller. But smarter'n most. I never knew him, then, but I heard of him. He comes here; he don't do nothin' but work for Dan. Yet he's makin' out fine. He sharps money off Homer, here, every time Homer gets his quarterly."

Homer said, "Four times, in one year."

"Dan pays him quite a bit," said Duke, carefully. "The Duchess finds him a nuisance behind doors and sich."

"Damn you, what do you mean?" demanded the Duchess, rising from her chair. "No man takes advantage of me!"

"Temper!" warned Duke, raising a finger.

Dan Cross's voice was deep in his throat. "You rode in on that trail the day Regan was killed."

"Yaas, indeed!" nodded Duke. "Just gettin' to thet. Each one of us had a reason for killin' Dick Regan. *And* an opportunity."

"Furthermore, the weapon was found here," said Homer equably. "Anyone could have put it under the cabinet."

"I'd admire to see the Duchess climb a tree," said Duke. "She could do it—and it was from a tree Regan was killed."

OUTDOORS there was a humming sound. They were whooping it up in the Apache Bar. The spy had carried word, Duke knew, that an arrest was imminent. There would be a determined force to prevent such a contingency, which might establish the new regime firmly in office. . . .

Indoors all was still. The quartet sat hunched in thought. None looked at the other.

The Duchess spoke first. She said, "I was out in that country the day Regan was killed. I—I saw him, lying in the stream. . . . I put my horse into the water and left no trail, coming home fast."

Dan Cross said, "I was there too, right behind Duchess. I saw her. I thought mebbe—well, Regan was a bad hombre. . . . But when I seen he was stabbed in the back, I knew better. I made time gettin' away, then swung

back and met Stade and his cut-throat bunch. . . ."

Homer said, "I never did see him until Duke took me there."

Duke said, "I came along before any of you, then. He was still bleedin' a little. Ever notice corpses don't bleed? There was a track. . . . I followed it a ways."

"And found me," said Homer.

"Yaas, indeed," nodded the fat man. He took another drink of bourbon. "But we got to arrest someone. They'll be hittin' the Mex quarter pretty soon, when they get drunk enough. I promised them people protection."

Dan Cross said, "Make your damn arrest, and get it over with. I've sweat this out long enough. I hanker to fight a little now!"

Duke said, "Put your riders in the Mex quarter. Then the gang'll come over here, figgerin' to git us first. . . . Homer, you be ready to act like a real sheriff, but meantime, you better play us that tune—thet funeral tune. . . ."

They went down the stairs slowly, solemnly.

CHAPTER FIVE

No Duchess for the Duke!

THEY began drifting into the Duchess Saloon as darkness fell. At first there were just odds and ends of men who did not customarily drink elsewhere than the Apache, but later recognized Stade henchmen came.

The four at the end of the bar remained bunched, saying little, forgetting the evening meal. The Duchess was flushed and her eyes were very bright.

Once Duke went out back, stayed a few moments. When he returned, Jake Stade, Ded Dedham, Taos Pete, German Herman, Drag Fyfe and Longhorn Beck were at the other end of the bar, drinking whiskey.

Homer went back to the piano. He played a few sprightly tunes for the crowd.

It ended swiftly. Homer stood up, his lean face smiling upon the assemblage. He said, "Gentlemen—and Duchess—I have an announcement to make. That was my last performance. I am no longer a piano-player—a professor. Today I was elected Sheriff of this County." He paused and the elliptical lines of his countenance deepened. He said, "Tonight I—"

"Am about to make an arrest," the Duke said loudly. "For the murder of Dick Regan."

Jake Stade eased around the end of the bar and stood alone. He said, "I aim to be in on thet."

"Yaas, indeed," said Duke Bagley.

"I aim to cut down on thet murderer," said Stade. "He'll hang before mornin'."

Duke said, "There's been several murders here of late. I been talkin' if over in the Mex quarter. Seems like a Mex can't own over four dollars American afore someone waylays him, kills him an' robs him. It ain't fittin'."

Stade said, "That's got nothin' to do with Regan."

"Regan was a rough hombre," said Duke. Homer had stepped down and was frowning, his hand on the gun in his pocket. Duke went on, "But he did get bad killed, that's a fact. Yaas, indeed. Knife in the back. . . . You was out there early that mornin', Jake. Couple Mexicans saw you. Rest of your crowd come out later and joined you."

Stade objected, "Now wait a minute, Bagley! You cain't come in here and—"

"Got quite a mob with you, eh, Jake?" asked Duke pleasantly. "Gave you a chance at me the other night, didn't I? Yaas, indeed. Rest of your boys are after the Mexicans, huh? Tyin' up Dan's riders, so you could come over here and play bully. . . . Nice figgerin', Jake, but not nice enough."

"It'll be nice enough afore I'm through."

"Let's not talk about me," purred Duke. "Let's talk about you—and Regan. You're the money-hungriest man I ever did see, Jake. You and Ded Dedham. Own about everything in town, don't you? Own the Apache Bar, too!"

TAOS PETE blinked. He was not a clever man, and now he looked completely foolish. German Herman, a patch on his face, scowled and moved to the left, to give himself room to draw. Duke apparently was not watching. . . .

"Regan told you off, more'n once," went on Duke. "He won Homer's money regular, sharpin' him, and you wanted a cut. . . . It's plumb funny how much Mexicans hear, just hangin' around quiet like, ain't it, Jake?"

The ex-sheriff said, "If yore tryin' to say I stabbed Regan—"

"I'm callin' you on that hand you dealt me," said Duke. He swung away from the others, so that he stood alone, a grizzly bear of a man with his gun in its holster, facing Jake Stade. "You ordered me outa town. I stayed and beat you at your own game of politickin'. You gonna stand up under it, Stade?"

The burly man flushed. He was neither brave nor cowardly, perhaps, but he was of the west of that day and time. To be faced down in his own town, by a fat stranger, to be flatly contradicted and accused and flouted, was a thing he could never live down. He knew it, everyone present knew it. Men began drawing aside, at first slowly, then with commendable speed.

Very soon there was only German Herman, Drag Fyfe, Longhorn Beck and Stade at one end of the bar. At the other was Dan Cross, Homer Carter, the Duchess and the Duke. Jake, his eyes going around, was on the spot.

Duke said easily, "Go ahead, Jake . . . I'll give you first shot. Take it when you're ready."

Stade had been a gun fighter, but he was out of practise, from living off the fat of Boot Town. But he knew the gun-fighter's tricks. He seemed to slump dejectedly, to turn aside. His head hung, eyes peeping from under the lashes. He took one step toward the door. . . .

Then Stade swung and went for his gun.

No one present had ever seen anything like it. The Duke had not budged. His hawk nose was thrust forward, his white teeth were slightly bared. The Duchess inhaled sharply. Homer tried to draw his six-shooter, but the hammer caught in the lining of his pocket. . . .

Stade thumbed his gun. It roared once and the Duke's Stetson flew from his head.

Duke said in the steadiest voice in the world, "Never aim high in a barroom fight, Jake. . . ."

His hand did not seem to move. Yet in an instant his holster was empty and the blue steel of his gun was waist-high in his white hand. The blisters hurt as he grasped the butt lovingly. He pulled the trigger once. . . .

JAKE shot twice more. The first bullet went to Duke's left and smashed the piano bench. The second went into the ceiling. The .45 pellet from Duke's Colt had caught him in the middle and knocked him backwards, so that his arm flew up. . . . Yet any one of his three shots might have killed the Duke. . . .

German Herman, remembering the episode in the stable, made the first mistake. He drew and attempted to get Duke before Jake Stade had died upon the floor. Dan Cross dipped for two guns and shot German Herman neatly.

The others were thus tooled into it. . . . Homer got out his gun. It bucked badly on him. He managed to get one shot into Fyfe, staggering him. He emptied the weapon, then remembered he had neglected to provide himself with extra cartridges. He started forward, intent only on getting to the Duke's enemies before they killed him.

The Duchess threw her arms around him and dragged him behind the bar. She thrust a shotgun into his hands and gritted. "Damn it, Homer, kill them all!"

He came up with it, looking for game. Duke was shooting down Taos Pete and Longhorn with two neat, off-handed shots.

He said, "Hold it, Homer . . . Yaas, indeed. There's no more opposition. Guess you can call the Regan case closed."

The Duchess said, "Closed! You mean—"

"Yaas, indeed," nodded Duke. "You're the Mayor and Homer's sheriff and Dan'll back you. Oughta make it nice for the county. If you can run a good, clean place like this was afore these characters come in and died all over it, you can run Boot Town!"

She came from behind the bar. She held out her hand and said, "You must stay. We can't get along without a man like you very well."

The Duke winced under her firm handclasp. His hand hurt . . . One of Cross's men came in and said the crowd had dispersed and he reckoned the fun was over.

"Yeah," said Dan Cross slowly. "Check out—we're ridin'."

He nodded to Duke, and went out.

"Duke," faltered Homer, "I—you have no idea what you have done for me. . . . I was about to—"

"Yaas," said Duke. "I knowed that. . . . Pay attention to the Duchess. And Homer, make her Mrs. Carter soon, will you? Makes for confusion, havin a Duke *and* a Duchess in this country."

Homer said, for once taken aback, "She wouldn't—she doesn't—"

"No?" grinned Duke. "Who'd she go fer when the shootin' started? Who'd she try to protect? Dan? Me?"

HE LEFT them staring at one another. He went back to the stable and found Petey munching oats as usual. He got his ornate Spanish saddle and adjusted it to suit himself. A lean Mexican of middle years came out of the shadows and spoke liquid Spanish into his ear. Duke nodded and answered, "The gang that was preying upon you is wiped out, Senor. Have no further fear. . . . And of the other thing, you know enough never to speak—lest the Duke return!"

"Heaven forbid!" said the other, crossing himself fervently.

They shook hands ceremoniously. The Duke mounted, took a last drink, threw away an empty bottle. For a moment he sat, wondering if he had done what he could call right. . . .

He had no other law but his own conscience. He lived by it, and readily he admitted that it was a hard-worn, calloused thing. . . .

He rode along the road, letting Petey have his head. The moon was waning when he came to the stream and the low-lying branch and the green grass. He got down.

After awhile the horse and rider came in. Duke said, "Yaas, indeed, Dan . . . Knew you'd be along."

Dan Cross got down and came close, rolling a cigarette. He said, "You're powerful smart, Duke. I remember now, how smart you were. The bunch never had trouble until you left."

"You were just a button," Duke said.

They were silent awhile. Then Dan said, "It's purty here, but I don't like it."

"I know," said Duke. "But it wasn't any doin's of yours."

"I laid for him to kill him," Dan said unemotionally. "He was bleedin' me."

"But you laid with a rifle, on yon hill,"

said Duke. "I read all the sign, that mornin', afore I dared ride to Boot Town. . . . You back-tracked and found Regan here, dead. You rubbed out the sign and took off."

"Yeah, that's the way it was," said Dan heavily. "Stade never killed him, Duke."

"Nope," said the Duke easily. "Stade come next. He stole the money an' took the knife outa him. You forgot the knife, Dan. That was careless. It came from the kitchen of the Duchess Saloon, y' know. The Mex cook identified it. Herman planted it on the Duchess."

"I just cain't see her doin' it," said Dan Cross unhappily. "Not that it matters. . . . She'll marry Homer. I never did rate in . . ."

Duke said, "We're strange folks, Dan, you and me. We been outlaws, but we stick at the murder of such as Regan. Yaas, indeed. Strange." He paused, went on: "It was like this, as I read the sign. . . . She was out, lookin' for Homer, who had started early after Stade. . . . Regan found her here. Bein' that kind, he gave her a wrassle. . . . She had the knife, for some reason. While he had his arms around her she got it out and slipped it again' him. . . . I read the sign before you did, Dan, and I kin read sign. . . He tried to bluff her, an' she tripped him. He fell backwards . . . the imprint of the knife handle was in the mud. He fell on the knife his own self, Dan."

The other considered emotionlessly. "I seen it, but didn't read it thet way. . . He was on his face."

"She turned him over, tried to revive him. Then she got panicky and rode up the stream. After a while she remembered it would look like someone jumped him from the tree and had to keep still . . . She's a deep woman, Dan—not fer the likes of you or me. . . ."

They sat awhile and the Duke broke out another bottle. Dan said, "Again you're right, Duke; not for you an' me. . . . So you gave Jake first shot because he didn't do it."

"Him and his gang were killin' Mexicans," said Duke. "Remember the time that skinny greaser got us away from the Rangers, the time we hit King Barron's herd an' nearly got caught?"

"He saved us, right enough," admitted Dan. "I been good to greasers ever sence."

"Miguel's in town," said Duke. "He's the one brought in them votes. . . Well, Dan, hope you get along with the new Mayor and Sheriff. . . ." He corked the bottle and tightened the girth on his saddle.

Dan said, "Where you headin' now, Duke?"

"Far away from Boot Town," said the Duke. "Yaas, indeed! Homer's a great fella, but I want no part of any Duchess!"

THE END

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HELL'S HIGH-GRADERS

As gun-guard for the Denver-bound Treasure Express, could Britt Burnett lend his straight-shooting guns and his good right arm to a desperate gang of bullion bushwhackers, who had earmarked the hard-won gold of honest men for their own?

Quimby leaped aside, going for his gun. . . .

Powerful Novel of Hard-Rock Miners

By Cliff Farrell

CHAPTER ONE

Blood-Ransom

THE big cake bore twenty-four candles, and said "Happy Birthday" in red jelly-beans set in its thick pink icing. Britt Burnett found the cake sitting on the table in his cabin in Lodestone when he came in just after dark.

Cap'n Kidd, the big red and green parrot, who shared the cabin with Britt, screeched a raucous welcome from his cage. "Many happy returns, dammit!" Cap'n Kidd squawked. "Many happy returns, dammittohell!"

"You old devil," Britt remonstrated. "Nettie Lang taught you the first part of that greeting, but the cuss words are your own idea. If you disgraced us by using any of that bull-whacking lingo while she was here I'll give you a bar of harness soap to chaw on."

"How 'bout a slug o' brandy?" the parrot squawled.

Hard-rock miners and powder men had been the bird's tutors. They had also taught him to drink brandy. Cap'n Kid had a reputa-

tion as an incorrigible sot. Britt poured a few drops of brandy in his cup, and the parrot dipped his beak joyously.

Britt looked at the cake and thought of Nettie Lang's lively brown eyes and winsome beauty. He wondered if she really knew how much this day meant to him. This was more than the mere passing of a milestone for Britt Burnett. Tonight would mark the end, for him, of six months self-imposed probation, during which he had placed his pride on trial for public verdict.

He lighted the candles and stood there, wondering what to wish for. There were so many things. . . .

He thought of Nettie's father, Big Tim Lang, who was hitting tough luck at his Sweet Julia mine. And he thought of his brother, Luke, missing six months and wanted for murder and robbery.

Britt looked a lot like Luke, who was six years his senior. Both of the Burnetts were dark-haired, dark-eyed men, long-legged, with solid jaws, and the deep brawn of hard-rock miners. Now Luke was outlawed, wanted by the sheriff.

"This is my last trick on a treasure car," Britt told the parrot. "Six months is long enough to prove my point. Folks are beginning to forget, beginning to look at me like a man instead of a freak. Big Tim needs me at the Sweet Julia. I'm quittin' after tonight's run."

"Hellsbellsdamnation!" said Cap'n Kidd.

Through the distant thunder of the stamp mills Britt heard the cautious scuff of boots approach the rear of his cabin. A hand furtively tapped the kitchen door.

Britt frowned. He blew out the birthday candles, opened the door. He stonily eyed the two men in miners' garb who stood there, avoiding the streaming lamplight.

"Kin we come in?" one asked in a half-whisper.

Britt hesitated, then nodded. They pushed quickly in, shoving the door closed. One, named Gotch Stover, was burly, with sloping shoulders and long arms. A stubble of black beard filmed his underslung jaw, and his eyes were like little dull pieces of coal. The other, Whitey Meech, was a spindle-legged, milky, pallid miner who looked like a consumptive.

Stover and Meech were shift bosses at the Montezuma mine, a rich diggings operated by Park Quimby. These two men had testified at a coroner's inquest that Britt's older brother had murdered a mine guard, and had escaped with the Montezuma monthly gold clean-up one stormy night half a year in the past.

"Pull down them blinds, Burnett," Gotch Stover rasped.

"Afraid of something?" Britt asked quietly.

"Maybe," Stover shrugged. "There's reasons why it ain't best for us to be seen together tonight. We got a little proposition to make."

"Start talking," Britt said curtly.

"Me'n Whitey has got a chance to earn five thousand dollars tonight," Stover said. "Thet's the price Park Quimby, our boss at the Montezuma, has offered fer the delivery of a certain party to the law—dead or alive. We kin make the delivery right on the hoof, but figgered we'd talk it over with you first."

BRITT felt the impact of that drive through him. He knew what they meant. His brother was charged with killing a mine guard named Coke Barrett, and fleeing into the mountains with a bullion clean-up worth more than twenty thousand dollars. Gotch Stover and Whitey Meech had told of trading shots with Luke as he escaped into a howling blizzard.

No word had ever come back from Luke, but Park Quimby, the Montezuma owner, still had a five thousand dollar reward posted for his capture.

Britt did not believe that reward would ever be collected. He had been mighty close to his older brother. He was more than half convinced that Luke was dead. Otherwise he believed Luke would have got word to him, somehow, of his whereabouts.

Britt stood there remembering the hell he had lived through after the Montezuma holdup. As the brother of an outlawed killer, he was a marked man, and under suspicion.

To his own surprise, and to the indignation of the mining camp, he had been offered a job as shotgun guard on the express company treasure cars which carried the mine clean-ups from Lodestone to Denver.

Shocked citizens had flooded the express company with protest, predicting the same outlaw strain that had cropped out in Luke would show up in Britt also.

Britt knew that Big Tim Lang was back of his being hired for such a responsible position. Big Tim, who had made and lost two fortunes in mining ventures, had powerful friends, and some of them no doubt were connected with the express company.

Britt and Luke had saved Big Tim's life more than a year in the past when a premature explosion had trapped the mine owner in a drift. They had performed miracles with dynamite and drills, getting to him before he suffocated, risking their life in the rescue. Big Tim had never forgotten.

Having Britt named as express guard was Big Tim's way of showing his faith, and of smashing the tide of public opinion that might have driven Britt into the wolf pack out of sheer desperation.

Britt had acted as gun guard in express cars

for six months. Three times a week he made the round trip to Denver, standing watch over money and bullion consigned to the banks or mint. No treasure safe in his custody had ever been robbed.

When he wasn't riding guard, he was spending what time he could, working in Big Tim's Sweet Julia mine, helping fight a discouraging series of cave-ins that were threatening to bankrupt the owner.

Now he stood there staring at Gotch Stover, shaken by the veiled hint that Luke was alive.

"Luke is dead," he blurted out.

"HE'S alive," Gotch Stover sneered. "An' he ain't fur away. We got him. We was tipped off not long ago thet a chap answerin' Luke Burnett's description was workin' fer a freightin' outfit up in Wyoming. Me'n Whitey took a pasear up there a few days ago by train. It was Luke all right. We done the job ourselves, because we didn't aim to split the reward with nobody. We sneaked him back home, an' put him on ice where we kin lay our hands on him ag'in in a hurry."

"All right," Britt said icily. "Let's see your hole card."

"Five thousand ain't such a bad stake if we turn Luke in," Stover drawled. "Then ag'in, we said to ourselves, maybe Britt Burnett, bein' Luke's brother, might want to tilt the ante if we let Luke go loose an' forget we ever cut his trail."

"How would I go about tiltin' this ante?" Britt jeered. "Do I shake the money out of my sleeve?"

"Maybe you could shake it out of an express company safe tonight," Stover grinned.

The room was silent. Through that silence Britt could hear the harsh thud of his pulse. He tried to laugh scornfully. "You don't expect me to really believe you've got Luke a prisoner."

Whitey Meech extended a hand, opening it so Britt could see what lay in the palm. Britt started at a hammered gold finger ring, adorned with a carved buffalo head. Luke had worn that ring always. Britt had one just like it. And they had made a pact. In case of a life-or-death crisis, the brother in trouble would send the other his ring, if he could, as a sign that he needed help.

Britt took a long breath. He believed them now. "Where is he?" he asked huskily.

Stover's attitude became menacing. "Don't git any notions you kin find him. We'll turn him loose on one condition, mister. You're ridin' guard tonight aboard Number 16. The Montezuma clean-up is bein' shipped to the mint on that train, and it amounts to a nice jag of bullion. We ought to know, 'cause we delivered it to the express office this afternoon. We're fed up at workin' fer day wages for Park Quimby. Number 16 always stops at the Summit Station water tank at 10:15. We kin git to Summit in time by saddlepack over the pack trail if we start right now."

Stover studied Britt a moment, then added, "Unlock the door on the express car when you hit Summit Station tonight. Have the safe unlocked. We'll do the rest. It's a cinch, ain't it?"

Again that silence fell. Britt's mouth was a bitter, thin line. "Luke'll swing shore, if we fetch him in," Stover prodded.

A vast emptiness was in Britt. He thought of the faith Big Tim Lang had shown him, and of Nettie's loyalty. This was to have been the last night of his probation, and now. . . .

He couldn't let Luke go to the gallows. Guilty or not, it just wasn't in his blood to let that happen.

"The door will be unlocked at Summit," he said wearily. "The safe will be open."

CHAPTER TWO

Death at the Sweet Julia

TRIUMPH showed in the hard eyes of the two men. "See thet you don't change yore mind," Gotch Stover warned. "Don't forget

we got Luke where we kin make things miserable fer him."

"When you head for Summit take along a fast horse for me," Britt said. "You don't think I'm going to take your word that you'll turn him loose, do you? I'm staying with you until I see Luke alive—see him with my own eyes."

Then he added with blazing bitterness, "Don't you savvy that I've got to ride? I'll be an outlaw myself, after tonight."

They glanced at each other. Then Stover nodded. "It's a deal. We'll have a horse fer you. And you'll see Luke all right."

They opened the door and slipped out. The rumble of the stamp mills beat a dismal refrain to Britt's thoughts. He heard the bell of the switch engine in the distant railroad yards, and the clash of couplings. Number 16, the night train to Denver, was scheduled to pull out within an hour, and he would be riding in the express car, as usual.

Summit Station was only about ten miles from camp by way of mountain trails, but the distance by rail was more than double that because of the grade that had to be conquered.

Britt shaved, changed to a dark, sack suit and soft white shirt. He got down a sawed-off shotgun and a rifle from the rack, made sure their bores were clean, and loaded them. He laid a holstered six-shooter on the table alongside the heavier guns.

A rider pulled up before the cabin. Light, crisp heels approached, and a hand tapped the door.

It was Nettie Lang. She was wearing a riding skirt in the fashion of the day. Her roan gelding, which was tied to a sapling pine before the cabin, bore a sidesaddle.

"Happy birthday, Britt," she smiled.

"Thanks for the cake, Nettie," Britt answered, trying to put life in his voice. "How about a sample?"

"How 'bout a slug o' brandy?" Cap'n Kidd screeched.

Nettie wagged a reproving finger at the parrot. "Keep a decent tongue in your head, you nasty old pirate," she admonished. She covered the cage with a cloth, consigning the parrot to a darkness that silenced him. "That's safer," she chuckled. "You've simply got to teach him better manners, Britt."

Her rich, dark hair was piled in a big coil at the back of her head. A tiny bonnet was perched forward on her head. She was shapely, and vitally feminine, but Britt had seen her on hunting trips riding hell-for-leather on that sidesaddle through rough country that had stopped more than one man. She was an exper wingshot with a quail gun and could handle a rifle and six-shooter.

She looked at the guns on the table. "The last night as a gun guard, eh, Britt? I'm glad."

"The last night, Nettie," Britt nodded. His voice was wooden. There was no life in him, none of the old response this girl had always aroused in him. Britt had never spoken of love to Nettie, but she had understood that he was only waiting until his self-imposed probation was over.

His mood subdued her now, frightened her. "It'll be a blessing to Dad when you can give full time to the mine," she said slowly. "Dad needs you. He's hit nothing but grief lately."

"I know," Britt said tonelessly.

GRIEF was a mild term for what Big Tim Lang was bucking. His mine, which was named after Nettie's dead mother, was the discovery prospect in these diggings. Big Tim had hit pay ore two years ago, and that strike had created Lodestone. Half a dozen other paying mines were in operation in the district now. The railroad had been built into the camp to help develop the country.

But mining was always a gamble. The Sweet Julia vein had faulted, and Big Tim had sunk most of his previous profits driving exploratory drifts in an attempt to pick it up again. He was confident that he had never really struck the true bonanza, and believed the mother lode lay somewhere beneath his property.

After months of heavy expense Big Tim's patience had been rewarded. Thanks to the sagacity of Luke Burnett, a thin stringer of ore had been picked up. That trace had showed promise of widening into something sensational as it was followed deeper into the mountain.

Then misfortune hit Big Tim again, dealing him a series of paralyzing blows. Dynamite being carried in ore cars into the main shaft had let go, bringing down an enormous cave-in. A pump engine had broken down, flooding the diggings. Another cave-in had followed.

The climax came with the robbery at the neighboring Montezuma mine, which cost Big Tim the services of Luke Burnett, his shaft boss on whom he had come to lean heavily.

Britt had stepped into Luke's shoes as best he could, helping direct the crew that was battling to reopen the mine. The job had taken months, but was now nearing success. Another week or two would see the shaft cleared. Then they could begin trailing that stringer of ore again, hoping it would soon lead them to the bonanza Big Tim was confident lay near at hand.

Nettie watchd Britt now, a shadow in her eyes. He had not cut the birthday cake. He seemed to have forgotten it.

She began pulling on her gloves to leave. A deep jar ran through the earth, and Britt felt the cabin lift to the tremor. The report of a heavy explosion rolled over Lodestone with whip-lash violence.

He and Nettie rushed into the open. The camp aroused. Men and women poured into the straggling length of the street.

Above camp the lights of three of the mines showed against the face of the mountain, with rock dumps spilling down the slants in giant fan-shapes.

"It's the Sweet Julia!" Nettie gasped.

A plume of dust was mushrooming above the face of the mine, dimming the stars.

BRITT tossed the girl on the sidesaddle, mounted double back of her. They crowded the horse up the grade. The dust was clearing, and Britt saw that the shaft house at the mouth of the Sweet Julia tunnel had been blown to fragments. The donkey engine had been hurled off the platform, and the boiler was gone, except for a few jagged fragments.

Big Tim Lang's gaunt figure, and shaggy thatch of gray hair loomed up as they reached the scene. Nettie uttered a sob of relief.

"Boiler exploded," Big Tim said dully. "I was in the shaft at the time. Shorty Wills is dead. Old Nelse Anderson got a broken laig. It could have been worse. The night shift had just gone down the shaft, or they'd have been wiped out."

Big Tim stood with sagging shoulders, watching them load the victims in an ambulance. Britt climbed to the face of the mine, and spent many minutes peering around.

That hadn't sounded like a boiler blast to him. The explosion showed all the characteristics of dynamite. Still, there was no way of being sure. He kept his own counsel as he descended to where Big Tim and Nettie stood.

This was another body blow to Big Tim. Work would now be held up again for days and weeks until new machinery was brought in.

A thick-set man with a bulbous nose, and loose, moist lips, came up and shook hands with Big Tim. "Hard luck, Lang," he said. "If there's anythin' I kin do, any help I kin give you, jest say the word."

The arrival was Park Quimby, owner of the Montezuma, whose property abutted on Big Tim's discovery claim. Park Quimby had operated on a shoestring, sinking his shaft as close to discovery as mining law permitted. He had produced only low-grade ore for months. Then suddenly the Montezuma had hit it rich.

Quimby was the man who had posted a five thousand dollar reward for Luke Burnett's capture, dead or alive. It was his bullion Luke was charged with stealing that January night.

The man ignored Britt. He had never relented in his opinion that Lodestone would be better off if it got rid of Luke Burnett's kin. He had bitterly opposed Britt's appointment as express car guard.

Quimby beamed upon Nettie Lang. He wore expensive jewelry, and tailored clothing, but he was marked by hard drinking, and he was gross, and coarse-tongued. He lived in a big, new house, and maintained a stable of thoroughbreds now that he was in the money.

He was getting rich at the Montezuma, but he was held in contempt by real hard-rock men because of his methods. Quimby had imported two score of Chinese coolies from San Francisco to labor in his shaft.

Nettie Lang turned her back on Park Quimby. She had always detested the man.

CHAPTER THREE

Long Rider

BRITT accompanied Big Tim and Nettie back to camp. Big Tim was silent, wrapped in his gloomy thoughts.

It was nearing train time. The realization that this would be his final parting with Big Tim and this girl hit Britt now.

"Adios!" he said. "You'll look after Cap'n Kidd tomorrow, Nettie?"

She peered at him. "Of course. I always do when you're gone overnight to Denver. Is—is there anything wrong, Britt?"

"No, Nettie. Nothing wrong."

He went to his cabin, got his guns. He lifted the cloth from Cap'n Kidd's cage. "You'll have a new owner tomorrow, Cap'n," he whispered. "Be good to her."

Britt went out, closing the door softly behind him. He had in his pockets what few valuables he cherished. One was a picture of Nettie.

Cap'n Kidd uttered a single plaintive squawk as he went away. It was as though the bird understood. Cap'n Kidd had originally belonged to Luke. The night of the Montezuma holdup the parrot had sat in a corner of its cage, moaning and uttering heart-broken sounds. He had refused to eat for days afterwards, and had nearly died. Cap'n Kidd had grieved like a human for a loved one.

The strange part of it was that the parrot had started mourning for Luke even before word of the robbery had reached Britt. Some wild instinct that humans could not understand had warned Cap'n Kidd. That was why Britt had given up Luke as dead, that and the fact Luke had never sent back any word—until today.

Carrying his guns, Britt walked to the railroad station. Number 16, consisting of a combination express and mail car, a baggage car and three coaches, was just pulling.

Britt headed for the express office, which occupied the far end of the building. The station platform was deserted in that vicinity. Britt halted a pace before he reached the lighted door of the express office, which stood open.

The hiss of steam from the arriving locomotive had wiped out the sound of his approach. Then it had stopped suddenly, in time for him to hear his name mentioned inside the office.

He identified the voices of Big Tim Lang and Charlie Andrews, manager of the Lodestone express office.

He started to turn away, not caring to eavesdrop. Then he heard the express manager say, ". . . .that's a heavy jag of bullion going out tonight, Tim. If anything happened to it through any fault of Britt Burnett you'd have to make good on that bond. Fifty thousand dollars is a heap of money."

Britt halted, listening, "I'm good for it, ain't I?" Big Tim challenged.

THE answer came dubiously. "Just about. I checked up on you this afternoon. It's part of my job to keep an eye on bondsmen. You was good for a quarter-of-a-million six months ago when the Sweet Julia was in pay ore. But not any longer, Tim. The mine would still bring a fair price. But if anything happened to Burnett the express company would have to throw you into court to make good on that bond. You'd lose your mine, your home—everything. They'd clean you down to the clothes on your back."

"Hell!" Big Tim snorted. "Britt's guarded bigger shipments than this one."

"I'm bankin' on Britt too," Charlie Andrews agreed. "But, bein' a friend of yours too, I figured I better mention it."

Britt tip-toed away. He had always wondered why the express company had given him such a responsibility in view of the charges against his brother. He had known that Big Tim had a hand in it, but had never been told that Big Tim had signed as his bondsman.

To go through with this pact with Stover and Meech meant Big Tim's ruination.

Britt waited until Big Tim had left the express office. He entered then, reported for duty. The bullion was in the office safe in two sealed express boxes. It was from Park Quimby's mine.

"Quimby's hittin' it rich for a fact," Charlie Andrews gossiped as he and Britt stood gun guard while baggage men muscled the heavy treasure boxes into the express car and shoved them in the safe. "This is the biggest clean-up he's made."

Charlie Andrews locked the safe, and attached the company seal. Britt knew the combination. Only his hand would open the safe when the shipment reached Denver.

Britt closed and barred the car door after the agent had left. The forward third of the car was a mail compartment, separated from the express section by a steel wall, pierced by a door, which had a little round glass port for observation. That door was locked on both the mail and express side of the steel coach.

Pop Dillon, the railway mail clerk, was busy over mail sacks, distributing letters. Pop, spectacled, gray-haired, and a family man, saw Britt peering through the glass port, and waved a friendly greeting.

Britt was alone in the express section, with ten minutes still remaining before the train pulled out. Ten minutes in which to weigh his brother's fate against his loyalty to Big Tim and Nettie Lang. . . .

Presently the conductor bellowed, "All Aboard!" The engine bell clanged, steam hissed. Number 16 was rolling.

BRITT watched the lights of Lodestone fade, listened to the staccato beat of the exhaust from the engine as it fought to build up momentum before hitting the up-grades.

Rock cuts echoed back the roar of the train. Britt peered from the barred side windows. The moon was dragging itself clear of the mountain rims to the east. It was a clear, silvery June moon that flooded the land with white mystery; a night for love-making and romance. Britt tried to keep Nettie Lang's memory out of his mind.

He marked off the familiar landmarks. The spidery network of cattle chutes at the LK ranch roared by. He noted the lights of a sheep ranch as the train thundered across Boiling Fork bridge below Five-Mile gorge, and hit the last tortuous grade to the summit.

Presently the whistle wailed in triumph as the panting locomotive crawled over the crest of the grade. Britt went to the safe, and opened it. Brakes clamped, and the train ground to a stop at the water tank.

Britt unbarred the door on the side away from the tank, shoved it back on its track.

Two masked figures instantly came running out of the moonlight and entered the car.

Gotch Stover and Whitey Meech wore padded slickers that altered their appearance. They had covered their hands with white gloves. Bandanas were wrapped over their faces and over their hair. Gunnysacks concealed their boots. Only their eyes showed.

They had cocked six-shooters in their hands. Britt saw old Pop Dillon staring, startled, through the port.

Gotch Stover cursed and swung his gun around to shoot through the glass, but Britt pushed the weapon down.

"That's only the mail clerk. He can't interfere if you work fast. That door is locked. The safe is open. Fetch up the horses."

Britt helped drag the two heavy treasure boxes to the door. Whitey Meech brought up three saddled horses, and a pack mule equipped with a cross-buck packsaddle.

It was the work of seconds to load the steel

boxes on the mule, and swing into the saddle. Pop Dillon was still standing there, staring through that port as they spurred away into the night.

Stover and Meech lashed the mule ahead. They were well out of gunshot, spurring through rocks and brush when the locomotive whistle began screeching an alarm. Pop Dillon had given the warning of the robbery.

"What kin they do?" Gotch Stover exulted. "They can't chase us acrost country with a railroad train. An' they got no horses. It'll be two hours before a posse kin git on the job. Here's Blue Crick. We'll cool our trail in the stream until we hit the Spanish Duke ore road. Jerkline teams travel that road all night, an' will wipe out any sign we leave."

"First," Britt said. "We go to where you say you've got Luke on ice."

He had his cocked six-shooter in his hand. Gotch Stover scowled at the gun. "Keep yore hair on," he snarled. "We're headin' thetaway."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Living Dead

THEY left the stream where the mine road forded, and followed that dusty route. The direction was toward Lodestone, and once they pulled off into the brush to let an empty ore wagon and jerkline string pass by, bound back to the Spanish Duke mine.

Britt stayed close at the heels of the two men who had now removed their masks and slickers. In the bright moonlight he never let his eyes wander away from them, ready to shoot at the first suspicious move they might make.

But they rode steadily ahead. Britt sighted the lights of Lodestone through a notch in the hills down the mountain, no more than two or three miles away.

Gotch Stover looked back as they turned off the ore trail. They crossed a mountain meadow, then dismounted. Leaving their horses tethered, they moved ahead through brush.

Boiling Fork Creek coiled through the meadow to the right, and just below the meadow it plunged through a long series of rapids known as Five-Mile Gorge. Britt could hear the faint hum of the rapids.

There was an abandoned prospect hole nearby, and an old dugout some miner had occupied in the past. Britt had come upon the place while hunting.

Pushing through the brush, the dim outline of the dug-out entrance lay before them in the moonlight.

Stover spoke, "He's in there, Burnett."

Britt motioned with his gun. "You two go in first."

"You're a suspicious cuss," Stover snorted.

But he and Meech descended into the dugout, bending low to clear the sagging doorway to the place.

Britt followed close at their heels, his gun ready. Stover scratched a match, and in its brief, first flare Britt saw the shadowy shape of a man lying on the ground with ropes around his feet and ankles.

"Luke!" Britt exclaimed, and abruptly leaped ahead.

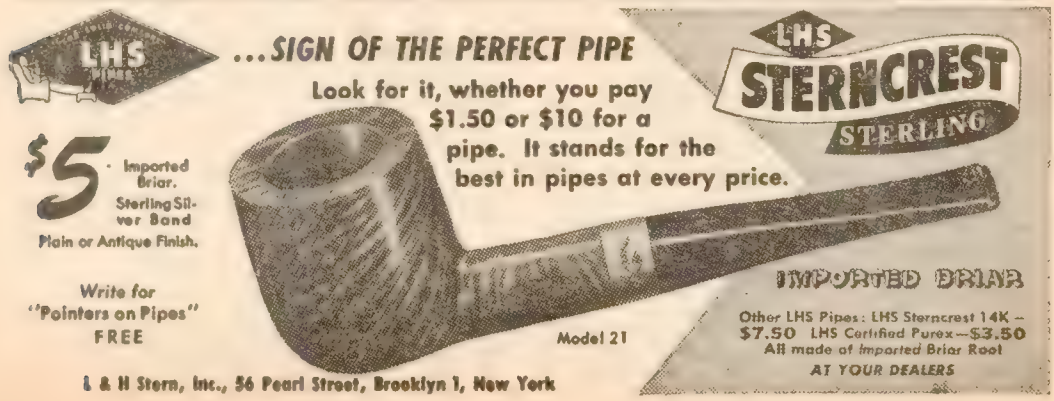
The ropes around the man's wrists fell aside. His hands jerked the six-shooter from Britt's fingers, and then clamped on his arms, holding him tight.

In the faint light Britt found himself looking into the face of Park Quimby, the bulbous-nosed owner of the Montezuma mine!

"Bust him one," Park Quimby barked.

Britt tried to wrest free, but Quimby, exerting all his strength, held him helpless for the instant it required for Stover to leap upon him. The muzzle of Stover's six-shooter crashed down on the back of Britt's neck, and he sagged limply forward across Park Quimby's legs.

THE blackness that engulfed Britt seemed suddenly to explode into agonizing flame in his head. He had a horrible sensation of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suffocation, and then one of slowly freezing.

His stunned mind told him that he was under water—drowning. He considered that with remote detachment for a space. Then the shock of complete return to consciousness drove through him, and with it came the will to live. Instinctively he began to struggle for his life.

His head emerged. Half-strangled he finally got a breath of reviving air into his lungs. He had been pitched into Boiling Fork Creek. With a gasp of horror he realized that the sullen rumble in his ears was the echo of the rapids where the stream left the meadows and began its descent of the mountain through the rocky Five-Mile Gorge.

He was no more than fifty yards above the gorge and was being swept with increasing speed toward the brink of the first rapids. He struck out frenziedly for shore, but the current was too strong for him and he was carried inexorably toward where the stream narrowed between big, spray-wet boulders to start its plunge.

He managed to reach one boulder that joined with solid land, but his desperate fingers slipped from its water-slimed face. He drifted to the brink of the falls and had a terrifying glimpse of foaming, spray-torn white water below.

Then his legs hit something solid, just beneath the surface. It was a long tree trunk, which had wedged across the lip of the descent, caught between big boulders.

He wrapped an arm around it. The drag of the stream threatened momentarily to snatch him away, but he finally inched along it into quieter back-water near shore. He fought his way to dry land and fell, gasping and spent.

After minutes he got to his feet. He was chilled to the marrow by the icy mountain stream. His head throbbed. That blow from Stover's gun had numbed his nerves, but immersion in the stream had revived him.

There was no sign of the three men who had tricked him. He looked down at himself in sudden wonder. He was barefoot. In place of his own clothes he was now clad in the ragged, soaked garb of a Chinese coolie. The finger ring he had been wearing—the companion ring to the one Luke had—was gone.

Britt suddenly turned, staring with a vast and grim horror down the rapids, where spume drifted in the moonlight.

"Luke!" he said despairingly.

The removal of his own ring by his assailants, and the recollection that Stover was in possession of his brother's ring and other personal belongings, was too significant to be mere coincidence.

It brought vividly to his mind another incident. A month in the past a prospecter had found the partial skeleton of a human being lodged in driftwood below Five-Mile Gorge. There were only a few human bones that had survived the battering of the stream. Clinging to them were shreds of rough, cotton cloth of the type of material the coolies at the Montezuma mine used for their smocks.

There was a bullet hole in the shoulder of the smock, and the coroner had ventured the opinion that the victim might have been a white man, though the evidence of the scraps of cotton cloth indicated that it was more likely the remains were that of one of Park Quimby's Chinese miners.

Britt looked down at his own garb now. Quimby and his two conspirators had consigned him to Five-Mile Gorge, with all identification marks removed, dressed as a Chinese. The parallel was obvious.

SUDDENLY Britt knew in his heart that Luke was dead. He had been thrown into the stream, and it was only by chance that any clew to his disappearance had ever been found.

But why? Why had he been murdered? Britt stood there thinking hard. He mentally recounted every incident of his brother's disappearance, everything that had happened since.

Then suddenly he began climbing away from the stream. He scouted the dug-out where he had stepped into Park Quimby's trap. It was silent, deserted. The pack mule and saddle horses were gone from where they had been tethered.

Britt headed toward Lodestone by way of the ore trail. He suddenly ducked into the brush, hearing riders coming. Crouching there he watched six armed men stream by, heading toward the summit. A deputy sheriff was in the lead.

It was a posse. Word of the train robbery had reached Lodestone. Britt knew that every trail and pass in the mountains would be guarded as fast as the law could spread manhunters through the region.

He resumed his way down the mountain, avoiding the road. Rocks and thorns gave his bare feet hell, but he hurried ahead.

He came out on the open mountainside not far above the mouth of the Sweet Julia diggings. The mine was dark, unlighted. Because of the explosion, all work had been brought to a standstill. Big Tim had laid off his crew.

Britt crossed a ridge into a small gulch. Park Quimby's Montezuma tunnel entered the mountainside on the flank of this gulch just below him. The Montezuma shaft house was lighted, the donkey engine puffing. He saw mules dragging ore cars to the waste dump.

The squalid shacks where the Chinese lived were scattered in the barren gulch bottom not far from the foot of the waste dump.

Britt descended, and cautiously scouted the odorous colony. He crept to the wall of one of the hovels. The sour tang of opium smoke assailed him, and he heard faint, sing-song voices.

He moved to another shack. It was silent. He opened the crooked door. Its occupants evidently were on shift at the mine. Searching around he found a pair of ragged, rope-soled sandals which he donned.

He had to search three more hovels before he came upon one of the round, bowl-shaped straw hats the coolies wore. It was a final addition to his disguise, and it served as an effective shield for his face.

In this shack he also made a find he had hardly dared hope for. A six-shooter and a box of shells lay in plain sight on a shelf. Hiding them in his sleeves Britt left the coolie colony.

Keeping to cover he climbed to the level where the track for ore cars operated to the dump. The donkey engine in the shaft house was laboring, and he heard the whine of the cable. A string of six ore cars crawled from the slanting tunnel, loaded with waste rock.

Mules were hooked to the cars. Driven by two coolies the cars came squeaking to the dumping point. Britt waited in hiding as the string of cars approached. They halted, and were spilled one by one, sending rocks rattling down the slant.

Britt arose, grasped the side of one of the cars and began to slide over its side toward a hiding place in its bottom. As he did so he glanced ahead to make sure the coolies were not in sight.

He was startled to see another figure clambering into the farthest car ahead. Like himself this furtive passenger wore the flapping garb of a Chinese, and a dishpan hat. But the hat toppled, and its wearer reached out and grabbed it before it fell to the ground.

Then that shadowy figure slid out of sight into the bottom of the empty ore car. Stunned, Britt stared for an instant. He had glimpsed a thick, braided coil of lustrous dark hair, such as no pig-tailed coolie had ever owned.

It was Nettie Lang, disguised as a Chinese! Like himself she was bent on secretly entering the Montezuma shaft.

Then the ore cars were rolling back toward the main tunnel. Britt glimpsed a gun guard, and was forced to crouch out of sight. The mules were unhooked, the engine cable was attached, and the cars began moving with increasing speed down the slanting shaft into the Montezuma diggings. Stygian darkness clapped down. Britt wanted to join the girl, but he could not leave his present position now, for the Montezuma tunnel was big enough only to accommodate the cars. To lift his head now meant being crushed.

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Britt's eyes were grim. He had his own reasons for this secret trip into the Montezuma. He wondered if Nettie Lang had the same purpose in mind.

CHAPTER FIVE

Underground Death

NO visitors had ever been allowed in the Montezuma. Park Quimby kept a gun guard always on duty at the shaft house to enforce that rule. But Britt had a hunch at least one other intruder had been down in the Montezuma in the past. That man was Luke, his brother. And Luke had never come out of the Montezuma alive.

Faint light appeared, and increased. The string of cars jolted to a stop. Britt chanced a cautious glimpse. They had reached a sizeable stope, lighted by a dusty overhead acetylene. The underground stable for burros was located here, and this chamber was the central point for galleries and drift tunnels that opened out in various directions.

A faint, cheerless smile pulled at Britt's lips as he noted the direction of one of those drifts. From far away in that tunnel came the faint sound of mining operations. The two other drifts were silent, and it was evident they were not being worked.

He glimpsed Nettie Lang wriggling from her hiding place, sliding over the side of the car into the shadows. He followed suit. A coolie had hooked a tandem team of burros to the string of cars, and now headed away into the drift that was being worked. That heading was where Park Quimby was hitting the pay ore that was making him rich.

Britt and the girl were alone in the low, dimly lighted chamber. Water dripped from the timbers overhead. The faint crash of jack hammers on drills echoed from the drift along with the receding rumble of the heavily laden ore cars.

The girl, small and shapeless in her coolie costume, discovered him. She turned her back, started walking casually toward that south tunnel. She had taken it for granted he was a Chinese. Britt strode to overtake her. She heard him and whirled, and he found himself looking into the muzzle of a cocked six-shooter.

"Lift your hands!" she ordered tersely. "Do you understand English? If so, do what I say, and—"

Then she recognized him, and the gun sagged. The girl stared, white-faced, grim-eyed. "So it's you, Britt. Well, I suppose this is as good a place to hide as any."

"Get out of this mine, Nettie," Britt burst out. "Are you loco? If Park Quimby catches you here he'll—"

"Why did you do it, Britt?" she asked lifelessly. "I know about the train robbery. Didn't you know this means the end of everything for Dad? He had signed your bond. He'll lose the Sweet Julia—lose everything."

"What are you doing here?" Britt demanded.

"I imagine you can guess. I've had a hunch for a long time all Dad's bad luck wasn't accidental. That explosion at the shaft house tonight convinced me I was right. It wasn't a boiler explosion. That was done by dynamite—deliberately. I began to figure things out. So I came down here to see if my hunch was right. I don't have to go any farther to know that I had added everything up and got the right answer."

She pointed to the south tunnel. "That drift where Quimby is hitting his pay ore heads right under Dad's Sweet Julia property, and from the sounds I'd say Quimby is working ground at least five hundred feet or more inside our claim. He has tapped the mother lode that Dad always knew was there—but it isn't his, legally. He's looting our claim.

"That's why Quimby uses Chinese who can't talk English, and keeps them supplied with opium," she went on, breathlessly. "That's the reason the Sweet Julia has had all those cave-ins and explosions. Quimby, and the ruffians who are in on the deal with him, have been dynamiting the Sweet Julia shaft to keep Dad from finding the pay ore, while they work it from the Montezuma diggings."

SHE kept the gun rigidly on him now, her finger on the trigger as she spoke. "I—I saw Gotch Stover and Whitey Meech sneaking away from your cabin early tonight," she continued haltingly. "I refused to think anything wrong about you then. But when I heard the train had been robbed, and that you. . . ."

She burst into tears. Britt's lips were ashen. She had every reason to believe he was in on this scheme to loot the Sweet Julia property.

The rattle of an ore car, descending from the surface, aroused him. Britt reached out, pushed Nettie's gun down. Taking her arm, he hurried her into one of the deserted drifts. She was still shaken by heart-broken sobs. He pulled her beside him into a crevice between timbers, squeezing into a narrow space barely big enough for their bodies. From that hiding place he had a partial view into the main stope.

The ore car rolled into view and stopped. Britt felt the girl's body grow tense. Her sobbing ended as they watched Park Quimby clamber from the car, followed by Gotch Stover and Whitey Meech.

Meech lifted out an opened dynamite case. Working fast, they began pulling out wired bundles of explosives, half a dozen sticks in

each bunch. The three men busied themselves capping the dynamite, and attaching long coils of fuse.

"Maybe we ought to let them chinks out before—before we—" Whitey Meech looked pallid in the dim light.

Quimby cursed him with explosive violence. "You goin' yella? You know damned well it wouldn't look right if the night shift was on the surface. People would guess we had blown the Montezuma in on purpose. Then they might figure out the rest of it."

Gotch Stover was also scowling at the spindly man. "Yo're in this to the finish, Whitey," he gritted. "Don't go belly-up now—it's too late. And don't forgit it was you that shot Luke Burnett in the back after we ketched him here in the mine. An' you helped git rid of his brother tonight the same way we took care o' Luke's body six months ago. You want a trip down Five-Mile Gorge?"

Meech swallowed hard. "Hell, I'm stickin'," he declared. "I didnt mean nothin. You figure you kin buy the Sweet Julia Park?"

"It's a sure thing," Quimby declared. "We'll use Big Tim's own money. The express company will sell him into bankruptcy to meet that bond he put up for Britt Burnett. Charlie Andrews told me about that bond a month ago. Thet's why I figgered out this stunt tonight."

"Britt Burnett was gittin' a little curious anyway," Stover said. "I seen him lookin' over that shaft house tonight after we blowed it up. He knew damned well it was a dynamite job. He'd soon've been figgerin' out things, like his brother did."

"It's time we covered our tracks," Quimby nodded. "We'll soon be working that lode from the Sweet Julia, and it will be done legally. The law can't touch us, then. The express company will pay us fer that bullion we took off the train. Someday we'll dig them boxes up from where we cached 'em. Thet's what you call eatin' yore cake an' havin' it too. We'll have to pay something for the Sweet Julia when it's auctioned off, but it'll be cheap at the price."

"Plenty cheap," Stover gloated. "There's a couple o' million still to be dug out of that block of ore, or I miss my guess. We ain't more'n scratched the surface."

They had finished capping the dynamite, and now began placing the charges around the stope, and in the drift that led beneath Sweet Julia's property. They were going to blow in the mine, and entomb a dozen or more Chinese who were in the heading.

A match flared, and the first string of explosives was alive. Nettie Lang uttered a little gasp. She had been poised tensely in that cramped position, her feet on loose rock that had accumulated against the timbers.

The rubble was giving way beneath her feet. Her fingers clutched at the wet timbers, slipped. She staggered, lost balance, and was forced to take a step out into plain sight.

Park Quimby heard that faint sound as he finished firing a second fuse. He came to his feet with an oath, peering at the figure he glimpsed dimly a score of feet down that tunnel.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed. "Pinch them fuses a minute, boys. There's a chink down there—"

DISCOVERY was inevitable. Britt reached out, pulled the girl back into shelter. He snatched the six-shooter from her hand. Then, armed with two guns, he leaped out into view.

He moved into the lighted stope, knowing what was coming, but determined to draw gunfire away from the girl's position.

The two fuses that had been touched off were sputtering, but they had a long way to burn, for Quimby had allowed plenty of time for himself and his partners to get to the open.

"Reach!" Britt snapped at the staring trio.

That was the mistake he made—giving them that chance.

Park Quimby leaped aside, drawing. His six-shooter blasted as he moved. Stover and Meech chimed in and the stope was lighted by flickering, vicious spurts of gun-flame.

Britt's six-shooters were blasting in response. He felt one slug twitch at his ragged garb, but he was moving, leaping around as he fired. Their bullets were bracketing him, thudding into the timber around him, but they didn't down him with that first burst.

He caught Whitey Meech in his sights, sent a slug through the man's chest, and saw him fall. But he realized in the next instant that the odds were still great against him in this lighted stope.

He shifted his aim, fired, and the acetylene lamp was shattered by the slug. The mine was plunged into darkness. Then the sputtering, tiny glare from the two lighted fuses made itself felt. That faint light was enough to betray any man who moved between it and a watching opponent.

A momentary, breathless silence came. Britt flattened himself against the damp timbers. He had three slugs left in one gun, two in the other.

He could hear the others breathing heavily. Then a gun blared twice, the double wink of

THEY'RE Saying It With Bombs. . . . YOU Say It With Bonds!
BUY A WAR BOND EVERY PAY DAY!

flame etching out the scene in brief brilliance. It was Quimby who had fired.

Britt saw Stover outlined against the black background of a drift and triggered instantly with both guns. He heard the slugs tear through flesh, then the deep sighing sound of a man dying.

"It's you and me now, Quimby," Britt challenged.

Quimby fired at the sound of his voice, but the slug was wide, for sounds were distorted in this echoing stope.

"Throw your gun down, Quimby," Britt spoke again flatly. "Light a match so I can see you—and move fast. Those two fuses won't burn forever. They can't have more than two, three minutes to go."

His answer was another shot that had no better luck than Quimby's previous attempt. Britt tried to remember how many times Quimby had fired. He wondered if the man's gun was empty. It was evident Quimby, knowing he would hang anyway, meant to die here when that dynamite let go, rather than surrender.

Britt heard a faint, metallic sound. It was the sound of a man trying to reload his gun.

It might be a trick, but Britt had to take that chance, for those fuses must now be perilously short.

He charged across the black stope. He heard Quimby pull a quick, involuntary breath into his lungs as the big mine owner awaited that oncoming rush.

That sound helped Britt. He barged into his quarry in the darkness. He swung with a gun muzzle, missed, and heard the swish of Quimby's return blow as it grazed his ear.

He was off balance. He twisted around, emptying his two guns, sweeping the area around him with five slugs. He heard one of those bullets register. Quimbly, who was no more than arm's length from him in the darkness, groaned, and then fell against him.

Britt lowered the limp body to the floor, then leaped toward the fuses. He fell over the ore tracks, arose, and hurled himself on the sputtering snakes, stamping them out.

"Britt!" It was Nettie's voice, hoarse with anxiety.

"Yes, Nettie," Britt said. Then he found her, in the darkness. He held her tight against him, his lips pressed against her hair until her hysterical sobbing began to fade.

"I—I was afraid it would be someone else who would answer," she sobbed. "Oh, Britt! I love you, and yet I doubted you. Forgive me."

TOGETHER they climbed up the slanting main shaft to the surface. Quimby's gun guard was on duty there, peering around uneasily. He stared at their Chinese garb, then found himself looking into Britt's gun.

The rest was easy. An hour later a score of men from Lodestone were in the Montezuma mine, listening to Britt's story as they looked at the evidence. They had found Park Quimby still alive. He would live to hang. Whitey Meech and Gotch Stover were dead.

Big Tim Lang stood with his arm around his daughter, his lined face somber as he listened.

"My brother must have scented this scheme last winter and sneaked into the Montezuma for a look-see," Britt told them. "They discovered him. There must have been a gun fight in which he killed one of them, but they got him in the back finally. Then they framed the story of that hold-up to explain Luke's disappearance and the killing of their pal. They dressed Luke in Chinese clothes, and threw his body into Five-Mile Gorge, the same place they tried to get rid of me tonight. They thought I was dead, too, I reckon."

The sheriff was present. He stepped up to Britt. "I reckon the jury will be lenient with you, Burnett," he said. "You pulled that robbery under duress and threat. Loyalty to your brother will be considered. But the bullion is gone. You heard Quimby say they cached the treasure boxes. These mountains are mighty big. Chances are the gold will never be found. I'm sorry, son, but you'll have to stand trial for robbery."

Britt looked at Nettie, grinning. "That bullion should be just about in Denver now," he said, "aboard the same express car in which it left Lodestone. I opened the safe before the train pulled out of Lodestone last night, opened the express boxes, and hid the bars of bullion back of some trunks and crates that were being shipped express in the car. I climbed out the other door long enough to toss aboard some fish plates and railroad spikes that was on a section car on a siding. Then I filled the treasure boxes with scrap iron. Quimby must have cached the boxes without even taking time to open 'em. They're not worth the trouble of looking for. Wire the mint at Denver—they'll find the bullion when Number 16 pulls in."

Nettie rushed to him. "I'll never doubt you again, Britt," she said contritely.

Britt kissed her. "You never really doubted me," he chuckled. "You let me push that gun away when you was holding it on me. You never really believed in your heart I was a train robber."

Her arms tightened around his neck. Britt looked at Big Tim. The big man's gaunt face was suddenly alight with triumph. Big Tim glared around at the bystanders challengingly. He had been vindicated in his faith, and he wanted them to know it.

THE END

SOMETHING UNDER HIS HAT!

By Cheyenne Taylor

His trail-mates thought he was plumb loco when he claimed he could make a first-class tent out of rabbit fur.... But the name of that Pike's Peak-bound greenhorn was to achieve as high a place in the saga of the West as did that of Samuel A. Colt!

"I CAN make a tent out of rabbit fur!" The speaker was one of a dozen young men sitting on the bank of a stream one spring morning in the early '60's, soaking their sore feet in the cool water. He was a slight, sickly looking fellow who had come West on account of his health. He wore the usual rough clothes of the frontier, including a coonskin cap.

The party, headed on foot for the Pike's Peak Country in search of fortune, had little equipment besides crude weapons and the clothes on their backs. The early part of the journey had been pleasant enough, but on reaching higher ground cold winds almost froze them of nights. They tried, unsuccessfully, to make tents by sewing skins together.

Now, the little man's statement caused the rest to stare in amazement till a tall, skinny fellow burst out laughing. The laugh was cut short when the little man jumped to his feet exclaiming:

"I'll show you!"

With his sharpened hatchet he shaved the fur off a number of skins. Next he fashioned a hunter's bow and using this caused the fur to fly into the air over a bare place on the ground. When it settled in a smooth sheet, he sprayed water over it. A short time later he lifted the fur and placed it in a pot of hot water.

Soon, the resulting compact sheet of cloth was passed from one to another of the young adventurers. Their amazement knew no bounds, and quickly turned to activity. They killed and skinned every fur-bearing creature they could find, while the little man turned the fur into cloth till they had enough for a tent.

From that time the other young men treated the little fellow with greater respect, but they were curious:

"How does the fur stick together? You didn't put glue on it . . . only that water."

"If you could see the fur under a microscope," the little man explained, "you would see that each strand has tiny claws on it. When the strands are close together and you wet them, they grab on. And when the fur is put in hot water, the claws set tight. That's all there is to it."

In answer to a question he explained that he had learned to make felt as a hatter in Philadelphia. And then in response to the importunities of his companions, he made a hat. It was tall-crowned and wide-brimmed, and along the trail brought him a great deal of curious admiration as well as ridicule till he sold it for a five dollar gold piece to a wagon boss.

Thus was created and sold the first Stetson; for the little man was John B. Stetson, later to become world famous as a hatmaker.

The fortune sought by Stetson in the west eluded him, but he did regain his health and soon returned to his first love, hat-making. At first he was unsuccessful. However, this changed when he recalled the episode of the adventure trails and put out a new creation called the "Boss of the Plains."

This new hat met almost instant approval of hunters, trappers, miners, teamsters, lawmen and desperadoes, cattle kings and cowboys. It was sturdily built and served as a parasol against the blazing sun, as an umbrella when the rains came, as a drinking cup on the trail, or as a useful article with which to fan the head of a sunfishing outlaw horse or a smoldering campfire.

Thus the creative genius of one of America's great industrialists—John B. Stetson—added a significant item of apparel to the romantic pagentry of the west.

Hats off—to John B. Stetson!

★ ★ BULLWHIP HELL

A Bullwhip Bill McCrackin Novel

By Tom Roan

CHAPTER ONE

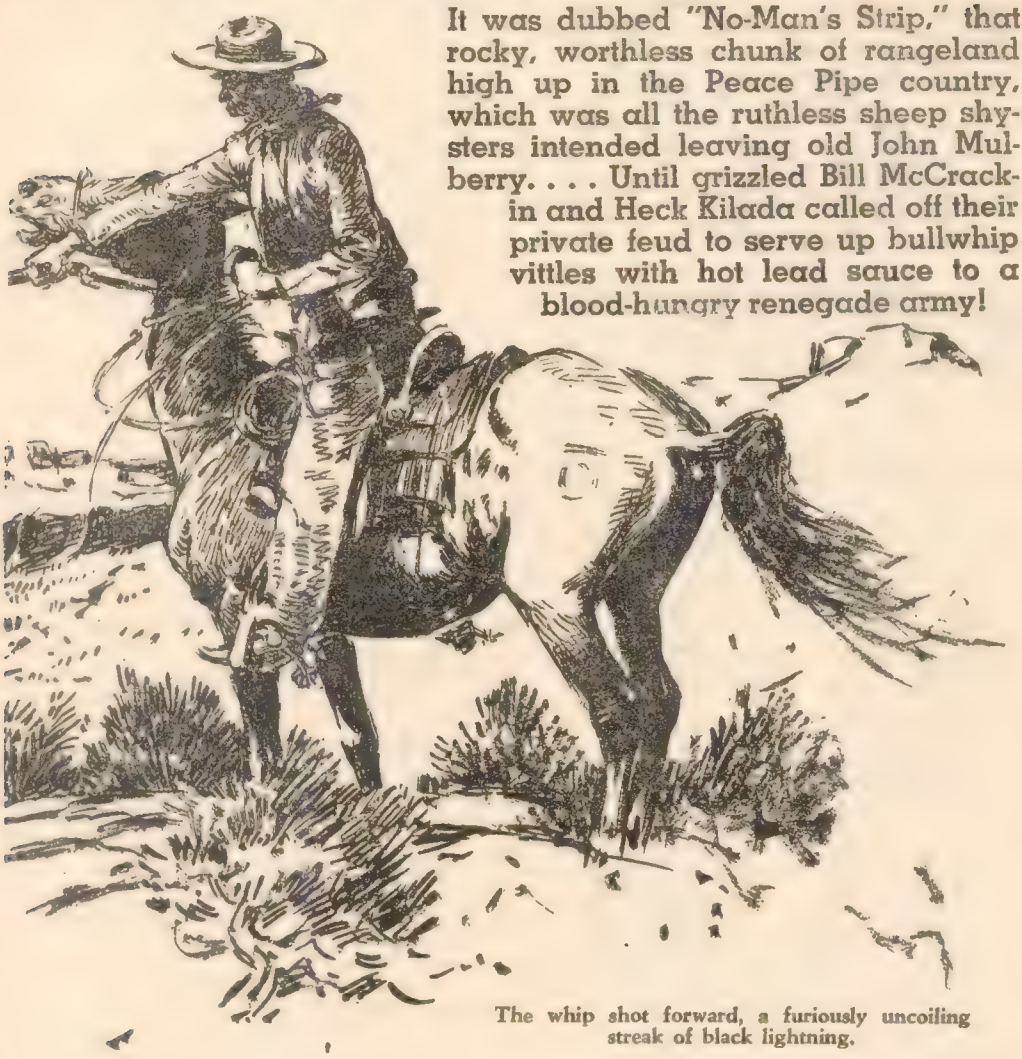
Birds of a Feather

NO ONE in Peace Pipe, Montana, had ever seen a wilder fight. It took place in Big Rube Hightower's Whiskey Jug late that afternoon. Old Heck Kilada had been there the most of the night before and all day, drinking in a back room with Hightower and a few of his hang-ons, and it was a well-known fact that he had come up over the Wyoming line with a sheriff hard on his heels.

Bullwhip Bill McCrackin had been in town less than thirty minutes. He had left his big white Gabriel's Trumpet in the stables on the east side of the street and had come ambling on across, a barrel-chested, raw-boned figure

HITS PEACE PIPE! ★

It was dubbed "No-Man's Strip," that rocky, worthless chunk of rangeland high up in the Peace Pipe country, which was all the ruthless sheep shysters intended leaving old John Mulberry. . . . Until grizzled Bill McCrackin and Heck Kilada called off their private feud to serve up bullwhip vittles with hot lead sauce to a blood-hungry renegade army!



The whip shot forward, a furiously uncoiling streak of black lightning.

in his shabby gray suit, with a six-shooter waggling at either hip and a 20-foot blacksnake whip coiled around his shoulder.

Kilada—looking shorter, stouter and more like a ragged range tramp than ever—had come out of the back room and was moving forward when McCrackin came in at the front door and paused to blink at the crowd at the long bar to his right. It was McCrackin, suddenly stiffening and glaring, who had spoken first.

"Up in Round-up," he had growled, "four years ago, I go to all the trouble of gettin' a mean skunk outa jail. The said skunk turns 'round a few nights later in a bunkhouse on the Mussellshell an' slips a rattlesnake in my bed. Then he burns the wind for other parts before I can shoot the snake an' get outside to catch 'im. Now I aim to whip 'im."

"Yuh ol' fool, can't yuh never take a joke!" Half-drunk, Kilada had let out a roar of laughter. "If yuh hadn't been so fast with yore shootin' yuh could a' seen that I'd braided fishin' cord around his head so tight he couldn't open his mouth to bite!"

And then McCrackin had hit him. Kilada had gone backward and down, sliding through the sawdust on the floor and all the way back to the big-bellied stove in the center of the room. Up like something on the bounce,

neither man thinking of reaching for a six-shooter, Kilada had come tearing back, head down, lumpy shoulders knotted—only to get hit again flat on the jaw and sent flying into the feet of the startled crowd at the bar.

The first couple of knockdowns marked only the beginning. After that it was one man down, then the other and it had been going on for almost ten minutes before long, lean Clark Bledsoe and short, pot-bellied little Buggy Smith, the town's two deputy sheriffs, came racing up the street from the jail and went pawing through the crowd. Each man carried a six-shooter in one hand and an over-sized blackjack in the other. Unlike their superior, Sheriff Long Tom Satterfield, Bledsoe and Smith were rarely known to arrest men without first trying to glide in behind them and knock their heads off with something.

Kilada, one red-booted foot hung in a cuspidor, yelled something that was lost amid the hurly-burly and grabbed for his six-shooter as Bullwhip Bill McCrackin suddenly buckled at the knees and went down from a blow behind the head delivered by Bledsoe. But Kilada was not quick enough to beat little Buggy Smith. Smith was behind him, a blackjack swinging viciously, and then he too went down, pitching forward on his nose, unconscious.

IT WAS a long time before Bullwhip Bill McCrackin found himself coming back to his senses, feeling as if wild horses had trampled him. He didn't know, yet, that he had been brutally kicked and struck again and again with the blackjack until saner men in the Whiskey Jug piled on Clark Bledsoe and forced him to desist.

The hard bunk and the iron bars over the window told him he had landed in somebody's jailhouse. It was already growing dark outside. A smoky lantern had been lighted in the corridor, and a dead-quiet held inside the jail except for somebody's snoring in a cell directly overhead. With pain pounding through him it was sometime before he remembered that he was in the town of Peace Pipe, that he had met Old Heck Kilada once more in his travels, and had been having a fight with him.

Just what had happened to end the fight so suddenly and leave it all a blank was more than he could remember. He had been doing all right, he recalled vaguely, although Kilada had knocked him down a number of times. That much was clear, but it was clear also that he had knocked Kilada sprawling in that last savage charge he had made; he could even remember Kilada getting up with one foot in a spittoon and coming back for more, but right there the entire picture faded from memory as if somebody had dropped a black curtain over the scene.

"Somebody," he groaned, "musta hit me from behind, but it couldn't a been Heck. The ol' cuss ain't dropped that low."

He dropped away into a stupor-like sleep again, and then sometime later awoke with a start. Peace Pipe, he reckoned, didn't have much of a roof on its jailhouse. A big drop of cold water had hit him on the bridge of the nose. He sat up to be hit by another and another, and then in the dim light shed by the lantern in the corridor he could see that the rusty ceiling overhead was dripping with moisture.

This was a hell of a note, locking a man up in a jailhouse to let him drown! Even the abundant supply of bedbugs were now rapidly climbing the walls as the bunk gradually became sopping wet.

He stumbled to his feet and looked out the window facing a slope to the west. The moon was shining, carpeting the ground in silver. A glance upward showed gleaming stars with no sign of clouds in the sky. He started kicking the wall and shaking the door, knowing that a jailor of some kind should be around somewhere, in case of fire or a man trying to break out.

At last, keys rattled in the lock to the door of the lower corridor and a slow, shuffling sound of feet moved forward in the dim light. The jailor was about like the rest of the town when he appeared—not a lot to look at. He was old and lean, a squint-eyed hombre, who at one time had called himself Slump Hendry. Sleepily, he had brought along another lantern without bothering to turn up the wick.

"Yeah, I know yo're kickin,'" he grumbled in a thin voice, "an' I know, maybe, yo've got a right to some complaint, but I ain't in no shape to he'p yuh, stranger. The fella upstairs above yuh is as drunk as a fiddler's squaw."

"But what'n hell," McCrackin wanted to know, "is he doin'? A man'd think he was fightin' a fire up there with a hose!"

"Yeah, I know that, too," the jailor muttered. "You look like a man in a bad fix. That fella up there has pulled the chain too hard an' broke it off at the top. The plunger's got stuck, an' he's got his hat jammed down in the bowl in the corner. He's Ol' Heck Kilada, yuh see, an'—"

Kilada!" McCrackin roared and shook the door. "Gawd A'mighty, of course it's him! "Course he'd drown me! Who in the hell had little enough sense to let *him* in here? But no matter. You get me outa here, pronto!"

The jailor stubbornly shook his head. "Sorry, fella, but I'm ordered not to take chances. Last time a fella talked me into movin' him—well, he beat my ears down an' locked me up an' walked off with the keys. I've got rheumatics and gotta be keerful. You

might gimme trouble like that other fella, but I'll go up an' try pokin' Kilada with a broom."

"You let me at him!" McCrackin again shook the door. "By the eternal, you let me get my hands on 'im!"

"Nope, there ain't a bit of use in yore talkin', stranger." The jailor turned away. "Lettin' you two together would be a shore sign of trouble. I'll go up an' see what I can do with him, though."

MC CRACKIN stomped the wet floor and waited impatiently. In a few moments he could hear the janitor banging and rattling a door above him. Spurred heels finally hit the floor with a crash, and a mean old voice let out a yowl of complaint: "What'n hell's the matter with yuh? Can't yuh let a fella take his rest in peace, gopher-face?"

"I ain't lookin' for trouble," whined the jailor, "but yuh got that water arunnin' an' it's just ruin' things down below. Leastwise, take yore hat outa the bowl an' let it go on down the way it's supposed to go. Yo're about drowin' the fella in the cell underneath, Mr. Kilada."

"Then let 'im swim!" McCrackin heard feet scrape. Then the bunk creaked, and he knew that the prisoner up there had rolled back on it to go to sleep. "I reckon there ain't no law agin it. Get away an' don't bother me!"

"Kilada!" McCrackin was standing on his bunk, one boot off and beginning to pound the ceiling with the heel of it. *"Heck Kilada!* Yuh ol' battle-axe, this is Bill McCrackin down here! *Bullwhip Bill!"*

"So it is you, Bullwhip Bill?" The question was followed immediately by a wild spasm of laughter. "Hell's delight, jailor, get away from my door an' let 'im drown!"

"You—you let me at 'im," McCrackin bawled. "My Gawd, fella, let me get my good right hand on his goozel!"

"Bullwhip Bill!" Kilada hooted. "Just where I've always wanted 'im!"

McCrackin kicked the wall. "I'll kill yuh!" he raged. "I'll pull yuh apart, yuh damned ornery old outlaw!"

But it was an idle threat. Old Heck Kilada was safe up there and soon was lustily snoring again, despite McCrackin's pounding on the ceiling. Slump Hendry had to leave him, knowing nothing else he could do. He shuffled back, down the stairs leading into the office of the jail, locking the upper corridor door behind him. After a long interval he was unlocking the lower corridor door and coming back to McCrackin.

His voice was half a whine when he spoke: "I figger yuh two ain't nothin' but birds of a feather, but I just can't let a man stand here in this spill. I've got a key here I'm gonna pitch through the feedin' trough. It'll open this door, but none of the others. You gimme time to get back outa here an' the door locked behind me. If yuh don't I'll shoot yuh. There's a stove back yonder in the end cell an' the cells back there are open. You'll find some wood an' can build yoreself a good fire to dry out with."

"Gimme that key, *please!"* McCrackin's lips were blue, his whole body dripping, now. "I've knowed that hawg upstairs for years, fought with 'im, an' ag'in him. But—but I'm so Gawd-awful cold right now, I—I couldn't hurt a blasted fly!"

CHAPTER TWO

Bullwhip Lashes Out!

LONG TOM Satterfield arrived at the jail well before dawn and found it as quiet as a tomb. Slump Hendry had a long list of complaints to make. He had at last stumbled upon the idea of going out behind the jail and shutting off the water, something he might have done when Old Heck Kilada first started the spill.

"He's the meanest man in the world, I swear," Tom Slump told the Sheriff. "Seemed

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to get drunker an' drunker on just what he had in 'im when Clark Bledsoe an' Buggy Smith brought 'em in here with the help of six others. The McCrackin fella was beat up somethin' awful."

Satterfield's eyes narrowed. "I heard all about it," he said briefly, "an' I've warned Clark an' Buggy they'll get it all back one of these days when they meet the right man. An' this McCrackin's probably that man—if he hangs around these parts long enough. Go on home an' get some sleep, Slump."

With Hendry out of the way he took the keys and went upstairs to Kilada's cell. Kilada was sober, as he followed the sheriff down. Satterfield gave him back his six-shooters from where they hung on a spike in the wall. At the same time he delivered an ultimatum.

"One more set-to like last night," he said bluntly, "an' I'll run you out of town for good, Kilada."

"But I didn't do nothin'—not much, anyhow." Kilada looked at him innocently. "Just put a snake in his bed once, four years ago, an' he's still fool enough to remember it. Me an' him allus sorter have a fight, when we run into each other."

"You get out of his sight an' stay out of it!" ordered the sheriff. "He comes out of here at sun-up. If you're still around then I'm locking you both back up, Kilada."

"Bill's all right." Kilada grinned crookedly, his mouth still swollen from the fight. "Just a damn fool, Bill is. No raisin' to speak of, no character, just an ol' bull-headed son-of-a-gun anyhow yuh take 'im. Still," he frowned, "maybe he's broke an' can't pay a fine. I've got some money, two hundred dollars an' a little more—."

"Get goin'!" The sheriff gave him a push. "I'm goin' to turn 'im loose free an' clear. You've got two black eyes an' your nose is pushed up like a spout. If he'd stomped your fool ears off I might have been able to even dig up a little reward for 'im!"

Kilada strolled out a short time later, his soaked hat cocked jauntily on the back of his head. Heck Kilada was Heck Kilada, and it was hard to dampen his spirits. He would go straight to the rear door of the Whiskey Jug and have a few rounds of drinks, Satterfield knew. But then he would get his horse from the stables and go clattering on out of town—or so the sheriff hoped!

By sunrise, the stove had dried McCrackin out from head to foot, but it had had no warming effect on the cold, meant glint in his eyes as the sheriff took down his six-shooters and his bullwhip and handed them to him.

"Next time I get in yore jail with Heck Kilada," he growled, buckling on his belts, "don't go puttin' me under 'im unless yuh tell yore jailor to shut off the water first."

"The best thing you can do," the sheriff tried to meet his hard stare, and had to glance out the window instead, "is to get out of town, McCrackin. I know more about you than you maybe think, some of it good an' a lot of it bad, if I take all words for it. Don't try givin' us too much trouble up on Music Wind. You can't be of any real help up there to your old friend John Mulberry an' his wife."

"An' who told yuh," McCrackin eyes narrowed, "that I was maybe headin' for Music Wind?"

"Maybe a little bird," the sheriff answered shrewdly. "Just the same, you won't run into nothin' but trouble on Music these days. Bad trouble, McCrackin!" His eyes narrowed. "Anyhow, I want you to know I'm sorry my two deputies blackjacked you an' Kilada last night. I'm not too damned proud of that pair. Keep away from them an' you won't be apt to get hurt."

"Much obliged for warnin' me." McCrackin hitched his whip over his shoulder and turned toward the door. "But I don't scare easy of little tin-horn badge-toters like them two!"

Satterfield watched his broad back disappear, believing he had said just enough. At the stables McCrackin would learn a lot more about his beating from old Mose Bent, the town gossip, and Mose would pile it on thick enough to float. Sometimes a sheriff could have deputies actually forced on him, and this Bullwhip Bill might be the fellow to teach them a little manners. At least a man could hope!

McCRACKIN was not long. The short, hook-nosed old stableman was there, eager to spill a tale into his ear, and Mose Bent talked while McCrackin saddled Gabriel's Trumpet after making sure the old horse had been given his morning feed. The only thing now was to get on out of town—unless he could run into Heck Kilada first and pay him in full for last night's work!

"Clark and Buggy, allus beat up their prisoners," the stableman told him, "'specially strangers. Clark aimed to kill yuh, I swear. Them two have a set-in here with the wrong crowd. Long Tom Satterfield's a real gent, but they ain't. Too much hocus-pocus has been goin' on in these parts the past two years or so, big combines movin' in, the little folks bein' stood back an' losin' out."

It was galling to be told the whole of it, probably with a little embroidery added on. Bullwhip listened in silence, then swung into his saddle. A few minutes later he was on the old cattle trail that led west across Stolen Pony Creek and on up a long slope toward Music Wind Mesa.

"Country shorely must be goin' to hell,"

he growled under his breath, "when they let squirts like Heck Kilada land an' stay here. I've got a queer feelin' there's somethin' betwix that long-legged sheriff fella an' Heck, but I wouldn't trust that Heck outa my sight noways."

He was hungry, now that he had calmed down somewhat. Tom Satterfield had either forgotten or simply had not bothered to offer him breakfast, and he had had his last meal yesterday at noon at a sheepherder's camp many miles southeast of Peace Pipe. Back there in town he had been too danged upset even to think about eating.

There would be grub up yonder on the mesa, but that was still a good ten miles ahead. It had been quite a spell since he had been through these particular parts, but Big John Mulberry would be up there at the old Circle 44. And John's Lindy Lou set a table to knock a fella's eyebrows down.

He went up the long slope, leaning forward in his old Mexican saddle to make is easier for the horse. He was close to the rim when he saw the two horsemen galloping around a bend in the trail out of a little pine thicket ahead.

McCrackin stiffened. The leading rider, a long bean-pole of a man, sat a wall-eyed bay. The rider directly behind him was squashed down in the saddle of a short-coupled roan, a dumpy hombre with a round-moon face and popping blue yes under a wide-brimmed black hat. Both wore brightly shining stars on their vests and were garbed like cowpunchers coming to town for a little show-off in their Sunday-best.

"Deppities!" McCrackin warped the words out of the side of his mouth. "Must be that Mr. Clark Bledsoe an' the Buggy Smith squirt."

Bledsoe was the first of the two to straighten in his saddle. He swung to his right when he was about five yards away, yanking his bay to a sudden halt. The big-eyed Buggy Smith pulled up five or six feet away, to his left. Gabriel's Trumpet halted at the same time, an old horse that seemed born to sense trouble in the making.

"Yo're the fella we locked up last night!" Bledsoe's pale eyes had narrowed to sleepy-looking slits, his right hand poised close to the butt of a Colt. "What'n hell yuh doin' outa jail an' where'n hell yuh think yo're goin'? Judge Pyle ain't up this early an' tryin' cases like yores. More'n that, strangers ain't wanted on Music these days."

"Maybe my goin' or comin' ain't none of yore business!" All the things that have been done to him in Peace Pipe flowed back on McCrackin in sudden bitter remembrance. "The back of my head still hurts where one of you birds beat me up with yore blackjack last night. I was told it was you, long legs. In town, with plently of help around, them badges yo're wearin' might mean authority, but they don't mean a thing out here."

"Lis'en, tough fella," Bledsoe's voice was a mean dog's growl, "we're the law an' we'll just take yuh back to town an' *show* yuh how big we are!"

HE ROCKED back in his saddle, going for his Colt. The coiled whip on McCrackin's shoulder was quicker. On the tip of its lash, was an old siver *peso* with a slot cut in the middle of it. The whip shot forward, a furiously uncoiling streak of black lightning. There was a vicious thwacking sound as the coin struck squarely on Bledsoe's forehead, wilting him in the saddle before he could get the six-shooter out of his holster. He was falling as McCrackin spurred forward, the whip flying back for a second stroke to take care of Buggy Smith.

Seeing what had happened to Bledsoe, Buggy Smith tried to wheel his horse and run for it. The old coin on the lash caught him. With a wild cry he rolled out of his saddle and landed head first on the ground. His horse shied away, but Buggy Smith didn't move.

Clark Bledsoe was the first to recover consciousness. He groaned, tried to move, and fell back. Suddenly he was sitting up with a jerk, his hands braced behind him. The bull-whipper had disappeared on up the twisting trail, the clumps of jackpines and low knolls now hiding him. Bledsoe swore, then let out a startled howl when he saw that he was as naked as a wild turkey dressed and ready for the oven.

"Gosh, whut—whut happened, Clark!" Buggy Smith was coming out of it now and trying to get up. "It's you, all right, but yuh ain't got a damn thing on yore back, I swear!"

"You braggin'?" Bledsoe looked at him and snarled. "Only cover about you I see is a little hair on yore head where it ain't bald! Whut'n hell happened? Oh yeah!" His eyes popped. "He hit us with that damn bullwhip! An' my Gawd, where's our horses an' what'n hell's holdin' on to me so tight behind? Damn it, Buggy, it's a pole!"

"Yeah," nodded Smith, "damn if it ain't! And—by Lord Harry, Clark, we're handcuffed to the danged thing with our own irons!"

It was true! Stripped of their weapons and every stitch of clothing, the bridles taken off their horses and their clothes and weapons hung to the horns of their saddles, they had been left high and dry up here, the horses having been given a slap on the rump to head them on into town.

The old plug with the whip had done a thorough job of it! Somewhere on the trail

he had found an old buckling-pole dropped from some wagon and had simply handcuffed his victims back to back to the thing. Then he had gone on leaving them otherwise unhurt except for the welt on their heads raised by his whip.

"We'll be the laughing stock of Peace Pipe," Bledsoe groaned, "when this tale leaks out, Buggy. Gawd A'mighty, that bohunk give us a pay-back, all right!"

"Yeah, I reckon so." Smith was looking sadly down the slope, getting a glimpse of the trotting roan and the bay in the distance as they headed straight on for Peace Pipe. "Well, let 'em laugh, damn it! I ain't aimin' to run for nothin'. But you got ambition to be sheriff of Peace Pipe—"

"Shut up an' let's get goin'!" Bledsoe managed to buck to his feet, half-dragging Smith up beside him. "He ain't goin' to get too far up here without hittin' trouble. Somebody's apt to be comin' along this way soon, an' we've got to get off this trail. I don't know how'n hell we'll get back in town unseen, though, 'less we wait until dark."

"Wait!" Smith jerked to a halt as the distant reports of two shots, coming almost as one, sounded up there on the mesa. "Somebody up yonder's already lettin' the old devil know he ain't wanted around here!"

CHAPTER THREE

Stolen Range

McCRACKIN was just entering the Bugle Rocks, a mile-square jungle of tall, wind-eroded boulders not far back from the rim, when the shots came from nowhere to his right and slightly ahead. One bullet was not far from its mark. It cut across the top of his horse's neck, close enough to clip away a wisp of mane.

Gabriel's Trumpet lunged forward with a snort, and McCrackin swung him to the left, quickly finding better cover with the high rocks now all around them. Hitting the ground and snatching his old rifle from the saddle scabbard, he was away like a huge lizard scooting through the brush. He had not gone far before he heard the snort of a horse from the north side of the trail, and then a furious beat of hoofs racing away.

Old to the tricks of bushwhackers, McCrackin was not fooled. Two men had fired those shots, as close together as they had been, and one was probably riding away to leave the other to finish the job. Keeping low, he worked himself on across the trail, knowing now just about where the shots had come from. As he worked himself to the spot, he heard another horse nicker suddenly and a minute later was able to spot a big bay among the rocks. Then he saw the man, a big, dark-skinned fellow. The man had been knocked out. A rifle lay across the rock above him, its stock shattered by a bullet just behind the hand-grip. The bullet had gone on, striking him through the right side of the jaw and ranging upward to come out high in the right cheek, making an ugly wound.

McCrackin walked carefully across to the man and hunkered down beside him.

The position of the rifle indicated that the bullet which had clipped a piece of the mane from Gabriel's Trumpet had probably come from this weapon. The hombre who had gone galloping away had been here close by, hiding somewhere to this fellow's right, and he had apparently shot just in time to spoil the would-be killer's aim.

"Shows yuh don't keep the right company, maybe." McCrackin turned on his heel, rifle ready and still watching everything. "Wonder why I'm so important yuh would wanta kill me?"

"Don't care—whut yuh say." The wounded man had moved his head slightly to one side and was beginning to mutter. "I keep sayin' that—that Kalada fella—"

"Ain't no good, I'll bet!" McCrackin reached down and gave the man a gentle shake. "Go on, pard! Let's have the rest of it."

The man started to mumble something, but his voice was so weak now that the words were meaningless. Then suddenly the wounded man gave a convulsive shudder. It was the end, and McCrackin sat back with a scowl.

"Some men," he growled, as he slowly got to his feet, "shore die easy. I've been hurt worse'n that at times just gettin' a tooth pulled. Looks now like either a case for the sheriff or the buzzards, an' the best thing for me is to let 'im lie until somebody finds 'im."

He moved back, pausing here and there to listen. Gabriel's Trumpet was pulling away at the rich grass underfoot, but he had not moved a dozen feet from where he had been left. Still wary, knowing that men on the kill often waited until a man was swinging back into a saddle, McCrackin led the horse to a safer place up in the rocks. There he swung up to the kak, keeping away from the trail as he rode on, his thoughts busy on what the dying man had been trying to tell him about Heck Kilada.

"An' still," he grumbled, "there ain't no shore way of figurin' Heck. Only one thing can be certain. It's down-right rotten, whatever it is, an' only time will tell the tale."

REAL trouble, he reckoned, as he came in sight of the old Circle 44, was beginning to blow his way. The corrals and sheds stood out starkly beyond the charred and still

smouldering ruins of what had once been the huge, high-raftered barn. A mysterious fire, he was soon to learn, had roared through it just after midnight. Beyond the barn several haystacks had gone by the board, the roofs of a shed had burned away, and a couple of corrals were only black rings on the hard, bare ground. A few fire-eaten skeletons of poles still hung to charred beams, mute testimony to the desperate fight that had been made to keep the rest of it from going up in flames. Its sod roof had saved the bunkhouse, and there were places on the log walls and the steep shake roof of the main house where the fire had burned briefly before it had been subdued.

Four men squatted outside the bunkhouse below the saddle pegs under an overhang of the roof. They were all at work, each man polishing a rifle or six-shooter with an oiled rag. They looked up questioningly as Bullwhip Bill McCrackin rode up, scowling at the realization that he did not recognize any one of them as an old Circle 44 rider.

Old Nance Garnet, the cowboss, would surely still be here, he figured. Nance was a landmark, almost, after thirty years with the Circle 44. McCrackin pulled Gabriel's Trumpet to a halt and looked down at a bull-chested blackbeard just slipping the oiled bolt back into the breech of an extra-fine rifle.

"Where's John Mulberry?" he asked tersely.

"In the big house—maybe." The blackbeard fired him one all-seeing glance. "Who're you?"

"Friend of John's." McCrackin frowned, eyes going from man to man, a feeling coming over him that there was not a face in the lot he would like to trust. "I reckon Nance Garnet's still here, ain't he?"

"He is, yeah." A little jimble-jaw with a matted mob of ugly-red hair answered him and nodded toward a small knoll about four hundred yards south of the big, cool front porch of the house. "I've been told he allus said he'd make his last stop up there, an' he kept his word, I reckon. That's the graveyard over yonder, just in case yuh would maybe like to know."

"Nance *dead?*" McCrackin's left eye narrowed, right one growing as round and hard as a button. "Seems as how I just can't believe it!"

"Goofey, mister, has answered yuh." The blackbeard looked up again quickly, now slipping cartridges into his rifle, and McCrackin saw that he had a white, pin-point cast in his right eye. "Nance Garnet was buried up there in the graveyard Thursday afternoon. It looks like," he had glanced toward the front porch, "yuh might go on an' have yore talk with John Mulberry, if yuh know 'im like yuh say. That's him just come out on the porch."

McCrackin turned away, not ready to let his temper get out of hand just yet. Wonderingly, he rode on to the hitchrack under a few straggly trees with one side of their leaves scorched by the fire, and slid slowly out of his saddle.

THE MAN who had come out on the porch with his right foot bandaged up and a cane in his left hand might have been a ghost. His head too was swathed in a bandage, the entire left eye and that side of his face covered by it. He looked old, the gray beard on his face almost an inch long, his cheeks sunken, the right eye staring bleakly. McCrackin moved forward slowly, studying him, not yet quite ready to believe that this could be Big John Mulberry, the absolute picture of health

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the last time he had seen him. A woman's voice from beyond the window stopped him:

"It looks like Bullwhip Bill McCrackin, Pa!"

"So 'tis." The man on the porch nodded, the exposed side of his face twisting into something that might have been called a smile. "Better go hide the pocketbook an' the Christmas whiskey keg, Lindy Lou. Howdy, Bill!" He tried to make his voice boom. "Sorter thought I remembered that queer smell when I saw the ol' white hoss a'comin'. Come in! Ugly as yuh are, yuh ol' bat, yo're a sight for sore eyes!"

"Looks like somebody's been pokin' at one of yores, John." McCrackin stopped at the edge of the porch and thrust up his hand. "What yuh been doin' here, fightin' a buzz-saw?"

"Bill! *Old Bullwhip Bill!*" A slender little woman with gray hair had come rushing out of the house and across the porch to throw her arms around him. "My, it's so good to see you! If—if," she had suddenly started to cry, "you had only come long, long before this!"

"Let 'im come on up on the porch," Mulberry was edging back to an old willow rocker, "an' we can set down. My leg's giving me fits. Got me a bullet through it an' a busted lower bone a month ago, an' I got me another bullet through the flesh of the calf Tuesday evenin' when they killed pore ol' Nance, Bill."

"Yuh might start at the start." McCrackin's voice was a low growl as he seated himself in a chair with Mulberry to his left and Lindy Lou to his right. "I heard in a sheep camp yesterday that there was a lot of trouble goin' on up this way, but yore outfit wasn't mentioned. But wait!" He perked up his head, eyes suddenly widening as he stared to southward. "What'n hell am I seein' 'way off yonder!"

"Sheep!" Mulberry's answer was flat. "Just some sheep, two big wagons, some dogs, an' some herders. Now don't look at me like yuh wanta jump in my mouth with both yore big feet! I still don't eat mutton, an' I didn't bring 'em here. The laws says I don't own this range no more, Bullwhip."

"Look here, now," McCrackin glared at him, "yuh allus was sorter loose in the head, but have yuh gone slap-dab *crazy?*"

"Just about, Bill." Mulberry nodded. "Even the burns I got on my head an' hands fightin' fire last night don't hurt when I think about them damn sheep. Two deppity fellas with one of them Washington orders to back 'em up was out here last night just atter the crack of dawn to give me my walkin' papers. Atter all these years, I'm told, dog-gone it, that I ain't been nothin' but a thief livin' on stolen range."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kilada Again!

"WELL, maybe I had better begin at the beginnin'." Mulberry had eased back in his chair. "I bought Music Wind nearly forty years ago on one of them Spanish land grants. The papers give me all the land lyin' between the North Fork an' the South Fork of Rattlesnake Creek, an' on in a big V to the Stolen Pony. If yuh remember, the fork starts about twenty miles west of us at the toe of the mesa, right up agin' the rock-slide country. The upper fork stretches around the north side, the other hugged 'way down yonder south through the Bottomless Pits, swingin' through to join the Stolen Pony sixteen miles south of Peace Pipe.

"Two years ago," he heaved a sigh, "there was a big rock-slide on the fork. It cut the South Fork off complete, leavin' the stream bed as dry as a bone, makin' all the water come down the North Fork. Lawyers workin' for Bone, Bedlow an' Bone, the big sheep combine south of the Pits, started haulin' me into court. Judge Sydney Pyle in Peace Pipe decided ever'thing agin' us.

"The sheep combine, yuh see, has got one of them Spanish grants, too. It lets them come right up to the South Fork, an' the big slide seemed to work ever'thing in their favor. It backed up a lot of water an' brought it up to an old dry creek bed that used to run only in spring floods four miles north of the North Fork. Made a little strip ever'body called No Man's Strip—too rough an' worthless, anyhow, for anybody to want it. In court, though, it got mighty important. The sheepers have claimed for some time that the dry bed was the original North Fork, even dug up an old map some experts maybe made for 'em. Anyhow, ever'thing was agin' us, an' hell broke loose for fair when Pyle held that if we owned anything atall it was No Man's Strip an' not a thing else. The sheepers were told to move right up an' take over the mesa complete. There's even been threats of makin' me pay rent an' damages for usin' the mesa all these years!"

"An'," McCrackin nodded, "yore friends walked out on yuh, leavin' yuh to do all the fightin' alone?"

"What'n hell could they do!" Mulberry glared. "A federal judge can call in even the soldiers on yuh! They done it back down yonder in Oklahoma not so many years ago. In Peace Pipe Sheriff Long Tom Satterfield's my friend, but his hands are tied an' Tom can't do nothin' to help me. Leastwise," he lowered his voice, "not in the open."

"Maybe not." McCrackin's face looked hard as granite. "Still, he can hire deppities no

other sheriff with any sense would hire!"

"Forced on 'im, by Pyle!" Mulberry came quickly to his friend's defense. "Two of 'em was here at the crack of daylight. They had another court order. In four more days we're to get off this land, lock an' stock, or ever'body—meanin' my Lindy Lou to boot—goes to jail. Them fellas yuh see out there at the bunkhouse are workin' for Bone, Bedlow an' Bone—an' there's more of 'em around some'ers."

With Mulberry's wife joining in, McCrackin had all of it in a short time. Nance Garnet had been shot in the back down in the Bottomless Pits by gunmen hiding out up on a rim. John Mulberry had picked up the bullet through the calf of his leg that same afternoon. The few cattle and horses left to the Circle 44 were in No Man's Strip, and only four men were still hanging on with Mulberry, trying to see him through in spite of everything that could be done against him.

McCrackin had grown white and red by turns. Out of the corners of his eyes he had seen the men who had been polishing guns out beside the bunkhouse catch horses from a corral and ride arrogantly away. Two of them—the one with the cast in his eye and the gopher-face—headed down the trail toward Peace Pipe. The second pair galloped off across the range toward the sheep in the distance.

McCrackin tried to smile as he asked a question: "I reckon Lindy Lou don't have to feed 'em, does she?"

"NOPE, it don't go that far," Mulberry frowned. "They eat down yonder with the camps. Don't even sleep here all the time. But if yuh had looked close, yuh would'a' seen a court order signed by Pyle an' nailed to the bunkhouse door sayin' they're to have use of the bunkhouse. The fellas still with us sleep here in the house. They wasn't here last night, though, when we was fightin' the fire. Why don't yuh put yore horse in the corral an' get that saddle off?"

"Maybe I'd better." McCrackin arose quickly. "Then I'd like a bite to eat, myself. Ain't had nothin' since yesterday."

"Why didn't you speak up!" Lindy Lou was half angry with him all at once. "Food is one thing we've still got."

He moved on without answering her, glad to get away from them for even a few minutes. John Mulberry was licked. Lindy Lou was no better, though she had always been the stout one when it came to trouble. And yet McCrackin felt he could not blame them. An empty feeling of helplessness swept him. Other people's troubles had always concerned him, but usually he could go through them like a cannon ball through a shingled roof. Up here, ever since he had ridden into the country, something seemed to be holding him back, blocking him. . . . .

Maybe it was that infernal Heck Kilada. Old Heck always had a way of jarring him down and making him wish he had never seen or heard of him, and yet all the time John and Lindy Lou had been talking Heck had kept popping up in his mind. Out there at the big haystack corral he could almost sense the old buzzard around him, grinning at him from the side lines and ready to pull some sort of a sneaky little trick. Never would he admit it, but he could use Old Heck here. Heck would blast head-first into anything, never stopping to count the odds against him.

Returning, finally, to the house, he had the rest of it poured into his ears at the sixteen-foot table in the long lean-to kitchen and dining room on the north side of the house. Lindy Lou had set a plate for him. Before him was a steak as thick as his forearm, a platter of potatoes, a stack of flapjacks, a pot of coffee—enough to feed three hungry men just in from a hard day on the range.

The burning of the barn was like so many other mysterious things happening these days and nights. But the Circle 44 was not alone in its troubles. Months ago old George Hunt's Walking Rafter outfit, one of the largest in the country west of the Circle 44, had folded up and gone out of business without a corral, house or line cabin left ungutted by fire.

"Only mark left standin'," Mulberry declared, "was the big oak log that had been the beam over the main corral gate. I helped lift it up there myself, thirty years ago. George was found hangin' there on the end of a saddle rope one cold mornin' last winter. The story is that he went hawg-wild at the end an' hung 'imself after shootin' Old Sam Drum, his cowboss, an' settin' fire to ever'thing."

He shrugged. "Kinda funny way for such a fella to hang up his spurs an' pass on. And a danged peculiar way to pay off a loyal man who'd rid for 'im for years. Personally, I never heard of George Hunt quittin' a fight, though he was actin' crazy as hell an' talkin' about endin' it up in a string of bullets the last time I saw 'im here, drunk as a mule, on his way home from Peace Pipe. Wanted to start a fight with me, almost. He'd found some of his cows down in the Bottomless Pits a few days before. His brand had been vented an' mine slapped on, plain as day."

"An' didn't George Hunt know," McCrackin looked up with a growl over a saucer filled with black coffee, "that one of the oldest tricks in the west is to get two men afightin'?"

"He did know," Muberry nodded, grimly, "an' even said that somebody would have to come with a better trick than that to make us fall out, but back in his drunken fool bonnet

he wanted to quarrel. He had a crazy monkey with 'im, a bird who'd do just about anything. Most people say he was there or not far away when George went wild, an' some say he was just about the kind of a cuss to shoot Old Sam, then hang George to his own gate beam. But, say, now, Bill," his eyes widened, "you know Old Heck Kilada!"

"Kilada!" McCrackin jumped as though a .45 had gone off under the table. His saucer dropped, broke, and let warm coffee spill off the table and down on his lap. "Gawd A'mighty, John, why'dja have to bring his name up!"

"Well—well," Mulberry frowned, "you an' him has always sorter been kinda thick, nobody ever bein' able to tell which was the meanest an' which oughta be hung first. Don't go tryin' to protect 'im just 'cause he was yore friend an'—"

"Friend, hell!" McCrackin hit the table a smashing blow with his fist, rattling the dishes violently from end to end. "That hawg! That—that wart! Atter last night—"

"Well," Mulberry scowled as McCrackin caught himself, his face suddenly going red, "whut about last night? Don't start somethin' an' not finish it. Somebody said he was in Wyomin'—"

"Shut up!" McCrackin hunched himself lower over his plate. "There's some things a man just don't wanta talk about, John. He's back in Peace Pipe, Kilada is. I didn't know he'd been here before, except the couple of times I happened to deegrade myself by bein' with 'im."

HE tried to stay away from them for the rest of the day. As he strolled around the house he could not keep his eyes off the sheep outfits. He kept an eye along the trail toward Peace Pipe at the same time. Before the day was over that dead man down there in Bugle Rocks was going to be found. Buzzards circling in the air above the kill would see to that, and the finding of the body could probably mean some new brand of hell to pay.

At 5 o'clock, squatting on his heels out by the blacksmith shop on the east side of the corrals, he heard Lindy Lou calling excitedly to John from the kitchen door: "It's the Arizona Kid, Pa, and he's coming back in alone!"

McCrackin moved back now to join them as they came hurrying out of the house. The rider coming in from the eastward was mounted on a long-legged sorrel and was wearing a blood-stained handkerchief around his head. He was a young fellow, slightly stoop-shouldered, with eyes as gray as frost—a strong, tough-looking customer with a six-shooter at either hip and a rifle resting across his lap.

"What happened, Kid?" John Mulberry was almost yelling it. "Where are the other boys? How'd yuh get hurt?"

"We ran into a lot of bullets on the Strip," the Kid explained as he slid off his horse. "I got a scratch on the head as I hit the rocks."

"An' where in the hell was Butch Lark, Elmo Sand an' Bob Brown?"

"Behind me." The Kid grinned. "They had to scatter and head on into the rougher country above us. The sheep crowd seemed to be getting tired of eating mutton and we rode smack into four men butcherin' a couple of our yearlin's. Another was sittin' a white mare on a knoll in some little pines, as the lookout. He started the shootin' but his aim was poor. Then two of the others jumped into it. They had four pack-horses, and I guess they aimed to take the beef out after dark. I'm sure I recognized the lookout, but we'd never prove it—not with him on the sheep crowd side. It was Old Heck Kilada."

"Kilada!" McCrackin's upper store plate slipped. "That ol' groundhawg ag'in settin' in on this deal! Why *didn't* I shoot 'im this mornin' in Peace Pipe an' make it the end of 'im? John, he's gone back outlawin' shore as shootin', an' if they don't watch 'im he'll have the bank in Peace Pipe robbed before he's through!"

And then Heck Kilada answered for himself from five hundred yards to northward. A rifle crashed, a bullet building its wild shriek to strike the corner of the bunkhouse, seventy feet away. The shot had come out of a ragged little nest of rimrocks covered with jackpines. It was followed by a second, a third and a fourth shot, all the bullets slapping into the corner of the bunkhouse, and then, for one brief moment, the rifleman up there appeared.

"It's *him!*" McCrackin's voice was like a wail as he saw a rider flash boldly across an opening and drop out of sight with the Arizona Kid getting in one quick, hopeless shot from his rifle. "Ridin' that same ol' white mare he's rid for years!"

"Hold on, Bill!" Mulberry caught him by the arm. "There's somethin' queer about this! Ain't a better shot in the country than Heck, an' you seen where all them bullets went. Maybe he was tryin' to make us turn an' look toward Peace Pipe. Look yonder! Here comes a whole army, with Clark Bledsoe an' Buggy Smith at the head of it!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Flare-Back

McCRACKIN ran to the corral to get his old bullwhip. A glance had shown him that Mulberry was almost right. Clark Bled-

soe and Buggy Smith had at least twenty men behind them, most of them gunmen, by their stamp and bearing. One, mounted on a big, iron-gray horse and keeping well to the rear, wore a slouch black hat and a frock-tailed coat. He had a withered, hatchet-like face and a mouth that might have belonged to a sucker fish.

"It's bad when Judge Pyle comes out," Mulberry explained, as McCrackin hurried back into the house. "That's him taggin' along behind. Take it easy for Gawd's sake, Bill."

"Takin' easy is the trouble 'round here!" McCrackin barged on into the living room. "Let the Arizona Kid grab 'im a shotgun an' take the back door an' I'll take the front. Lindy Lou, you get down in yore cellar or somewhere else outa the way—an' take John with yuh if he ain't got no more fight left in 'im than he's lookin' like he's got now. I'll try to do the talkin'."

"They're the law," Mulberry warned, and then he was throwing aside his cane and grimly walking to the wall to take down a snub-nosed carbine. "But, hell, even at that a man can't stand ever'thing. Lindy Lou, you hunker down in the hall betwix us an' the bedroom. It'll be safer there."

They hadn't long to wait, after that. The horsemen were galloping up and swinging out in a circle around the house. Clark Bledsoe and Buggy Smith hit the ground in front of the house as if they owned the country all around. Brazenly now, having such a mob to back up their play, they strode across the porch and walked into the living room, six-shooters bristling. McCrackin had had time for just a few words to Mulberry and had stepped behind the door, and the deputies did not see him for a second.

Bledsoe spoke: "Mulberry, we've come for McCrackin. He's wanted for murder!"

"An', by Gawd," Smith's voice was almost a yelp, "yo're goin' with us too, Mulberry!"

"All in one load, I reckon." McCrackin had given the door a gentle shove with his foot to close it and stepped forward, a cocked Colt in each hand, the muzzles of the weapons suddenly jabbing forward. "Steady now an' don't get shot the first thing," he warned. "We ain't goin' nowhere with yuh an' yore crowd until we're hauled out in the blankets."

In a second he had taken their weapons. In another he had given them a furious kick that sent them pitching nose-first on the floor at Mulberry's feet. Mulberry, showing no fight at all until now, had suddenly unholstered a six-shooter and was covering them.

"What's going on in there!" It was Pyle, as brazen as Bledsoe and Smith, with so much authority and armed strength behind him. He had ridden up to the open window at the east end of the room and had leaned forward to poke his head inside. "Here, you can't do that!" he whinnied shrilly.

It was the last time Sydney Pyle was going to deliberately poke his head into anything. He yelled and tried to yank back as a long, black snake-like thing hissed through the air, the end of it wrapping itself around his neck and cutting the yell short. It was McCrackin's bullwhip flying back into action. A vicious pull on it snatched Pyle from his saddle, yanked him through the window and brought him flopping down on the floor, like a gaffed fish.

"Maybe now," McCrackin growled, "we can have a little friendly get-together, seein' we have such fine company."

"You—you can't do this to *me!*" Pyle blundered to his feet, irately flinging the end of the whip from around his neck. Then he was frantically sawing at his hip pocket. "I'll defend myself—"

McCrackin had stepped close. He struck just one blow, a driving punch to the mouth that lifted Pyle from the floor and sent him reeling back, a shiny little revolver spinning from his hand.

"Tooth-plugger, I'd say." McCrackin picked up the weapon, scowled at it, and threw it out the window. "Beats me how some plugs

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Sloe Gin

carry things like that in a gun-totin' country. How's yore cellar, John?"

"The one under this room," Mulberry was getting to where he could smile with one side of his face again, "is strong enough to hold bulls. No windows, no outside door, an' chopped right outa natural rock. Door to it is under that big table in the center of the floor, though I'm kinda afraid it's full of rats an 'all kinda bugs down there."

"Pray for snakes!" McCrackin gave the table a shove and lifted a trap door. "Let's get rid of this bunch of polecats. If they get to makin' too much of a holler we'll heat up some warm water an' pour it down on 'em."

BLEDSOE made a desperate attempt to back away from the trap door, but McCrackin smacked him briskly with the butt of his whip and pitched him down. A kick sent Buggy Smith whimpering down behind him. Pyle was no trouble at all. McCrackin whammed down the door and slid the heavy table back into place over it.

John Mulberry's old double-barrel shotgun roared suddenly from the kitchen. The mob outside was going wild. A few of them had tried kicking down the back door to come in through the kitchen, and the Arizona Kid had let go both barrels. Now, coolly reloading his weapon, an unlighted cigarette hanging in the side of his mouth, he was backing carefully into the living room.

"Keep 'way from a line with the windows," McCrackin warned sharply. "We've got the jump on 'em now, with their deppities an' their judge underfoot. What'd yuh do," he moved up behind the Kid, "shoot to bluff 'em off, Arizona?"

"Not that bunch." The Kid grinned, and there was something about that cool grin that reminded McCrackin of Billy the Kid. "I saw two go down, and some of the others got hit. This thing scatters shot to beat hell."

"Damn' if it don't!" McCrackin had taken one quick look and yanked the Kid off to one side. "Take it as easy as yuh can from now on, Kid. We're supposed to be fightin' Uncle Sam now."

"I've met 'im before," the Kid said calmly. "That's the reason I came out to this country. Got a match so I can light this smoke?"

"For Gawd's sake, Kid, go easy, *please!*" John Mulberry was getting scary again. "I never thought you was so hell-fired fast on the shoot!"

"A lot you don't know." The Kid took a match from McCrackin and grinned. "Thanks, Bullwhip, I sort of like you. Like these people, too. They've been like father and mother to me, something I can't remember much about havin' had before."

It was a wait after that. The mob outside had fallen back, leaving two men just outside the kitchen door. A couple others, wounded, had crawled away, hunting shelter.

"An' now," McCrackin was taking a peek out the east window, "I see a couple of 'em skinnin' out an' headin' back toward Peace Pipe. Goin' for more help, likely, though they had enough an' still have to almost eat the last one of us blood-raw."

"John!" Lindy Lou was coming in breathlessly from the hallway. "John, I smell smoke!"

"Gunsmoke, woman, gunsmoke!" McCrackin wheeled on her, half angrily. "The Arizona Kid shot some polecats and—*Huh?*"

Muffled yells came from the cellar, and suddenly the trap door shook to violent blows. McCrackin saw it then—thin little wisps of smoke curling up through cracks between the old floor planks.

"The fools!" John Mulberry groaned. "Damn' it, Bill, them damn' fools down there have set the house afire!"

CHAPTER SIX

Pile-up on Judge Pyle

THEY let Pyle up first, rubbing his eyes and wailing like a spoiled brat. At once—sprinting forward almost on his hands and knees—he tried to scoot between them in a desperate dash to the doorway leading to the kitchen. This was duck soup for the Arizona Kid. He caught Pyle by the collar and hurled him back.

"Stick around a little while, doodlebug!" The Kid grinned at him. "You're in good company, if we're not!"

"We—we didn't intend to do it!" Pyle whimpered shrilly. "We were striking a few matches, trying to find a way out of your infernal black pit—"

"An' yuh dropped a match, yeah!" McCrackin yelled him down. "Easy there, Bledsoe! Give yore bug-eye friend Smith a chance instead of tryin' to throw 'im back. He started up ahead of yuh. All this fuss won't do yuh any good anyhow. There's a pump in the kitchen an' a good well under the corner of the house. You dudes are goin' to work—an' maybe for once in his life Hizonnor will likewise know what it means to work for his keep!"

He set them to it, the Arizona Kid guarding them from the kitchen, while McCrackin and Mulberry kept them on the run with Lindy Lou holding a sharp lookout from the windows. The judge, wheezing and blowing, vigorously worked the pump handle while Buggy Smith ran back and forth with buckets of water. They had forced Bledsoe back into the cellar to throw water directly on the

flames despite his whimpering complaint that the smoke and heat were blinding him. When the excitement was over, McCrackin decided to put a sure end to any farther trouble-making.

"Over here!" he ordered. "One of you deppities on one side of the table, one on the other. I see you birds got yore handcuffs back. They're shore shiny an' purty, an' I'm usin' 'em ag'in to maybe keep from just havin' to shoot yuh like groundhawgs. You get under the table, Pyle, an' lie down there. I'm handcuffin' one of yore wrists to Buggy's, the other'n to buzzard-face, an' then I'm handcuffin' them two across the top of the table. All right, close in, now!"

"I'll be damned if I'll do it!" Judge Pyle exploded. "I'll take no more orders from a common bumpkin like you! My dignity has already suffered enough abuse at your hands!"

"Yore dignity?" A regular old grizzly growl rumbled out of McCrackin. "Hell, why can't yore kind learn yuh can't always be settin' on a bench with a gang of gun-plugs around to protect yuh! John, you an' yore wife watch the window, an' Lindy Lou, if yuh look this way yo're apt to wish yuh hadn't. Kid, you watch the other two squirts. Here an' now I'm overrulin' this monkey's motion an' takin' some of the dignity out of the seat of his pants!"

It was done so quickly, it was startling even to the Arizona Kid. McCrackin grabbed Pyle. He lifted him like a bag of bones and threw him across the table face downward. Like a bear tearing into a meat cache, McCrackin tore his pants down. Now the end of the blacksnake started rising and falling, McCrackin holding the squirming and yelling man by the back of the neck, the whip popping and snapping viciously.

"Damn—damn it," Pyle gasped, "I'll—be glad to do it, Mr. McCrackin if you'll—you'll let me up!"

"That's better." McCrackin let him slip to the floor. "Fellas like you need this kind of a thing sometimes, Mr. Pyle. Used to make me wonder why Indians allus whipped their young bucks the day they let 'em become warriors. Atter livin' among an' around Indians for years, I learned it was so they wouldn't act too high an' mighty in the future without knowin' somebody might come along an' take their pants down. That's right, Mr. Pyle. You catch on quick. One hand this way an' the other like I said . . . "

TWILIGHT came. Sydney Pyle lay under the table, his dignity requiring no further appeasement. McCrackin had sworn at Lindy Lou like an army mule-skinner when it had turned out that she could not turn a deaf ear to those three mean hogs at the table. She had slid a cushion under Pyle's head and chairs under the two groaning deputies, allowing them to sit facing each other instead of standing there in a painful crouch.

They were still holding their own. The gang outside had brought up more men from the sheep camps, but they were still keeping themselves at a safe distance. In time, McCrackin reckoned, the two who had gone to Peace Pipe for help would be back with it—hang-ons and bar-flies, all of the town's low trash willing to go out and shoot somebody just to make a reputation for themselves. No one inside the house could poke his head out the door without somebody in the distance taking a shot at it.

"We can't hold on here forever." McCrackin confided that to Mulberry and the Arizona Kid in the kitchen while Lindy Lou watched the living room. "This is one of them things where yuh don't know where you're goin' or what yuh aim to do. Yuh just keep on tryin' and hopin' for the best. Life's a heap like that, though. Nothin' ever runs true to form."

"I know what I'd like to do to Pyle." The Kid lighted another cigarette. "Just for the hell of it I'd like to go in there with about ten boxes of shells and start shooting him in the big toes and working my way up. Some hombre like him sent my father to the penitentiary for cattle rustling when I was two years old. He stayed there seven years before they found out they'd made a mistake. The law played around with its usual legal red tape before getting a pardon signed. Finally, Dad dropped dead in the warden's room in a five-dollar suit of clothes and a dime cap they had given him to pay for all his shame. My mother couldn't take it, so—"

"But yo've got to take it, Kid." McCrackin cut him off, resting a big hand on his shoulder. "Lots of times that same thing's been done. Them who make the mistakes never have to pay for 'em. Hell, no, they go out an' get elected ag'in. Yuh can't change fools by hatin' 'em. Wife's callin' us, John!"

"They're charging the house!" Lindy Lou had grabbed an old rifle from the wall and was hastily getting set to fight when they hit the living room. "Here they come!"

"Look out for a trick!" McCrackin yelled, always alert to danger from every quarter. "Watch the back, Arizona!"

It was a trick, but it failed. A mob of men were storming the front of the house, shooting wildly, throwing bullets in all directions. A bitter fire was soon meeting them, hurling them back with four men letting go their reins to buckle, reel and pitch drunkenly out of their saddles.

Out in the kitchen in the thick of it the shotgun roared, then the Arizona Kid's six-

shooters started drumming. Seven men had slipped up through a little wash back there, depending on the attack at the front of the house to divert attention from them. The Kid had dropped two more men, killing them dead in their tracks when they were close enough for the shotgun, and had wounded two more as they wheeled to flee.

McCrackin got there in time to catch the Kid by the arm and drag him back as he started out the door in pursuit of three men left to flee without wounds. He got the Kid back, slammed the door closed, and a few seconds later he was at the window with a rifle to his shoulder.

Sweeping across the mesa from the north, its mane flying like a flag of truce, came a white mare. In her saddle, balanced there like a whiskey keg, rode the chunky figure of a man, an old hat tilted back jauntily on his head, a shining .45 in either hand. Behind him, riding low, followed three more men, coming like hell in the wind.

McCrackin brought the rifle stock up to his cheek, then slowly shook his head. One terrible thought tore through his mind: It would be hell to have to shoot a man he had known for so long in this manner. Much better to make it face to face, and fight it out honestly, man to man!

"Wait, Bullwhip!" The Arizona Kid caught his arm just in time. "That's Heck Kilada!"

"I know it!" McCrackin shoved him away, voice hoarse. "Hell, I've knowed 'im for years, ain't I?"

"Yes, damn it," the Kid was beginning to yell at him, "but that's our Circle Forty Four boys behind him and they're trying to make the house! Look! Kilada's just killed one of the three men who got away from back here a minute ago! Can't you see the old fool's coming in on our side?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Battle Boomerangs!

BULLETS filled the air and kicked up the dust out there now as if every sheeper in the country had entered the fight. Holstering his six-shooters and pulling up a rifle, Kilada was leaving his lop-eared old gray mare on a dead run a few moments later. He struck the ground on the bounce, one hand still on the saddle horn like a pony express rider.

The riders behind, shooting like wild men, were not so adept. Two of them tried the trick and fell. The third pulled up completely and then spilled down, getting a bullet through his right arm as he left his horse and raced on after the others.

Old Heck Kilada didn't wait for the door to be opened. He gave it a violent kick, and it fell in with a crash, Old Heck atop it. Wild-eyed, he leaped to his feet, then, slapping a hand to his hip, he suddenly wheeled and ran back out the door again.

"Fool!" McCrackin yelled at him. "Gawd, he's gone crazy as hell! An'—an' now they've got 'im!"

Lead spurting all around him, Kilada ran a few feet and picked something up from the ground. McCrackin now shot forward and out the door, hell-bent to get him back and into the shelter of the house, although only a few moments before he had been uttering dire threats against him. By the time he got there Kilada had bucked to his feet and was wheeling around with a snarl.

"Get the hell outa my way, Bill! Mind yore own fool business! I got it!"

Kilada stubbed his toe on the threshold, but then was inside, triumphantly waving the article he had picked up.

"Yup, I got 'er!" Clutched in his right hand was a plug of tobacco. "Nigh brand-new. Thought I felt it jump outa my pocket when I hit the ground. Have a chaw?"

"Yuh went—went back out there for that?" McCrackin could not help it. He hit Kilada a blow that sent him sprawling.

"Yuh unforgettin' ol' fool!" With the others rushing to stand the broken door back in place, Kilada rose, wrathfully glaring at McCrackin. "I keep a fella from killin' yuh this mornin' down there in them Bugle Rocks by shootin' him just as he's pullin' trigger on yuh, an' here yuh are tryin' to kill me. And all becuz a real man's come to show yuh how to do yore fightin'!"

"So it *was* you!" McCrackin stepped back, glowering. "I thought I kinda smelled a skunk up around them rocks. What'n hell yuh doin' here, comin' to play yoreself a trick on somebody?"

"An' another thing," Kilada jabbed a finger at him, eyes like bullets, "stop pokin' me around! Somethin's liable to bend or bust if yuh don't. I've got eight sticks of dynamite inside my shirt."

"What!" Everybody wheeled to look at him. *"Dynamite!"*

"Lis'en!" His hand came up, and above the noise outside there was another sound, a low, far-away rumbling like distant thunder. The house trembled, and dishes faintly rattled in the cupboards. "Yessir!" said Kilada. "Four full tons of 'er!"

"Four *tons?"* McCrackin's eyes widened. "What'n hell yuh talkin' about, yuh ol' fool?"

"Spanish land grants, Bill." Kilada grinned and wiped a streak of blood from his nose and mouth. "But," he shrugged, "yo're too dumb to understand, anyhow. What're yuh tryin' to do here, fight so gentle yuh won't

hurt bedbug or flea? Yuh never won a fight in yore life unless I was around to finish it. Some low-down sheepers stole a crick, if yuh must know, an' we're stealin' 'er back. Don't try figurin' that one out. You ain't got sense enough. This kinda thing takes a man with brains."

"If yuh ain't lyin'," McCrackin grabbed him, "then what'n hell are yuh doin' runnin' through lead like that out there with the belly of yore shirt filled with dynamite?"

"Well," Kilada leered, "if yuh must know, I just don't have room for it in my pockets."

HE PUSHED past McCrackin and moved on into the living room. A moment later, acting as if there had never been anything like a fight going on, he was rocking back on his heels and roaring with laughter. Then he was down on his hands and knees, staring at the prisoner under the table.

"Yi-yah, jedge!" he howled. "Whut's chances on easin' up on yore bail for a pore boy a long ways from home? Damned if yuh don't pick the craziest places to lie down an' rest I ever saw! This ain't no way for a one-time Brazos River bank president to act. If the folks down there knowed yuh was this loco they'd forget that forty thousan' dollars yuh run off with ten years ago—"

"Shut up, fool!" It looked as if Pyle was going to make one desperate effort to get up and reach for Kilada's throat. "I never saw the Brazos. You—you're thinking of some one else!"

"I ain't thinkin' of nobody but you." Kilada declared flatly. "Last winter you hombres got seespicious of me up here, and I had to go out sorter on the run. Down in Wyomin' Tom Satterfield had to fix it up with a sheriff to high-tail me outa that country on a hoss-stealin' an' murder charge. That set me in good ag'in—"

"Damn it," Buggy Smith cut in with a wail, "I told yuh all along I didn't trust that jigadee!"

"His mammy didn't, even!" McCrackin, pop-eyed, spoke from the doorway. "Go on, Heck, an' keep spillin' 'er. If yuh ain't startin' in with a whole pack of lies it sounds like yuh might be on the right side after all. Said to myself this mornin' there was somethin' betwix you an' that sheriff fella."

Kilada had no chance to answer him. A sudden cry for help came from the kitchen. The sheep crowd had suddenly swung the full fury of an attack on the back of the house. For the next minute every window in the kitchen was blazing with answering shots, breaking the crazy charge and repulsing it

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with men rocking and reeling as they rushed for their get-away. And then a scream and the sudden slamming of the door into the living room seemed to shake the house.

"That's Lindy Lou!" Mulberry yelled, wheeling to throw himself against the door only to find the stout bolts had been shot home. "Somethin's happened!"

"Yo're right this time, Mulberry!" The jeering voice of Clark Bledsoe came back to him. "McCrackin oughta learn to look a deppity over a lot closer when he fastens 'im with his own handcuffs. He got one key, but we carry extra ones. Now we've got yore woman, an' maybe now it's our turn for a sort of a little kick-back. Shoot through that door an' yo'll shoot yore wife."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kilada's Hot Stuff!

BULLWHIP BILL took a chance, knowing that the pair of deputies could not have had much time in there to prepare themselves. When he had allowed Bledsoe to come up from fighting the fire he had kicked his and Smith's six-shooters down into the cellar. The heavy trapdoor had been dropped, the heavy table moved back in place. Bledsoe and Smith would not have short guns, probably only the old weapon Lindy Lou had had.

He hit the door and was thrown back as if from a solid wall. As he smashed his shoulder into it again Kilada was with him, the dynamite in his bosom forgotten. Together they carried it down, splintering it like matchwood. A rifle roared and gashed fire at them, and chips flew from the door.

Neither McCrackin nor Kilada were ever to know which one killed Clark Bledsoe. They went in with guns blazing, their sudden bursts of shots spinning the deputy around and sending him toppling to the floor. McCrackin yelled to the man behind him.

"Hold the house. We're goin' after Smith an' Pyle!"

Beyond the front door they could see Smith and Pyle running. Smith was carrying Lindy Lou and Pyle was yelling: "Hold your fire, gentlemen! This is Judge Pyle!"

They had a pretty fair start as McCrackin and Kilada started the pursuit. Shots tore at them as they crossed the porch. Then those still in the house were shouting encouragement and trying to protect them with a barricade of flaming lead.

It was a wild dash of two hundred yards before McCrackin's long bullwhip snaked out, bringing Pyle down. Leaving the judge to Kilada, McCrackin kept on. A little fall, even a broken arm, was not going to hurt Lindy Lou as much as that sheep gang might.

"Down he is!" McCrackin yelled as the whip struck a second time. "Hold fast to what yo've got, Heck!"

The lash had caught Smith around the feet. Smith had gone up in the air, whirled completely around, and come smashing down on his back, his fat belly good for something at last, for it provided a soft landing place for Lindy Lou. McCrackin helped John Mulberry's wife to her feet, then he grabbed Smith by the collar and roughly herded him back to where Kilada was boosting Pyle along in front of him.

"Says he can't walk!" Kilada let out a bray of laughter. "Sez I, 'Judge, if yuh can howl like yo're howlin', yuh oughta be able to even fly a little!' Here he is, Bill. You take the woman an' I'll handle these two. I don't see a damn bit of use in goin' back, now that we've got Pyle for a shield."

"This is murder!" Pyle was yelling. "Oh my God, they'll shoot us all!"

"Not you, they won't, Mr. Sydney Bone!" Kilada jeered at him. "An' don't say that ain't yore real name. Yo're a brother to them Bones of the sheep outfit and a cousin to Bedlow. Straight ahead toward that sheep camp now, and no back talk, dag-nag it!"

MEN charged in, but they were afraid to start shooting. It was not that way with Kilada and McCrackin, however. They kept pouring in lead at every chance. Then, hearing a wild cheer from the house and a burst of firing, they looked back and saw the Arizona Kid, shooting his way through to them.

"Where are they driving you!" he yelled as he came up.

"Nowhere, cowboy!" Kilada answered him. "We're drivin' them. Get holt of one of these ducks an' we'll travel faster."

Three men against that whole sheep army now! Yet they kept going—straight towards those bedded-down sheep and the two big wagons. Yelling like wild men, even the dogs fell back as they neared the camp, the frightened herders turning heel and scrambling after them. Kilada struck a match as they came close enough to the first wagon.

"Better hit the ground when I make my throw," he warned. "I ain't been carryin' this dynamite around all day just 'cause I like the smell of it."

Each stick of it was already short-fused and capped. With the Kid watching both prisoners now, Kilada touched fire to the fuse, waited till it started spewing sparks, then raced on ahead a few yards and sent it flying towards the wagon.

A roar shook the earth, and the wagon seemed to rise in the air, its canvas top exploding like a burst balloon. Sheep were bleating, dogs howling, men cursing. But

Kilada kept throwing the dynamite and howling like a maniac. Moving up, he quickly wrecked the second wagon, and by the time the fourth stick had exploded the sheep were stampeding southward, a dirty-gray flood moving in the pale light of the rising moon.

Kilada kept throwing until his last stick of dynamite was gone. Then he dropped to the ground holding his stomach, and laughing uproariously.

"Ain't had so much fun since I put the rattlesnake in yore bunk!" he hooted. "I swear, though, Bill, I had his mouth tied up. Hell, I didn't want 'im to get hydrophobia from bitin' a critter like you!"

"Laugh, damn yuh!" McCrackin yelled at him, "An' then look yonder." A heavy gray cloud was visible on the horizon to westward. "This thing ain't done yet. That looks to me like a troop of cavalry, by grabs! Yessir, that's what she is!"

"Them's cowmen, jackass! Look, Lindy Lou, an' see if you can't tell the difference. There ain't a sheeper left outside of these two—unless he's a dead 'un."

The riders came racking up out of the night. The first one down from the saddle was Long Tom Satterfield, and Pyle immediately started wailing at him.

"It's about time you got here, Satterfield! These outlaws have murdered about every decent man in sight. Look at the damage that's been done here! I intend to hold you—hold you—uh." He stopped suddenly, seeing now by the light of the burning wagons that Long Tom Satterfield was laughing at him. "Is—is something wrong, Sheriff Satterfield?"

"Ever'thing's fine," Satterfield answered dryly. "I've been a long time gettin' at you, Pyle—but thanks to Heck Kilada, I reckon I know how things stand. There's a lot of things we don't like in this country, Pyle, and you and your sheep crowd are part of 'em. Have you told him anything, Heck?"

"Just enough to jar 'im, Tom—so's he'd know you got cells all dusted out for him and the rest of his cut-throat crew! Let's go back to Jawn's house an' finish it there. I'm hungry an' Lindy Lou here is the best damn cook I ever knowed, by grabs!"

"Lis'en, you!" McCrackin had caught him by the arm and was leaning close to whisper. "I don't care much what happens, now that there's signs of peace 'round here ag'in, but yo're always crampin' my style when ever yuh come along. Now, say one word about that water last night an' I'll kill yuh! And gimme a chaw of that tobacco, if yo've still got it."

"Why, shore, Bill." Kilada handed him what looked like the same plug. "He'p yoreself. Ain't nothin' too good for us two, is they, old hoss?"

It was just about two seconds later that McCrackin started realizing Heck had switched plugs on him. This one was loaded to the hilt with the most hellishly hot cayenne pepper that had ever burned a man's tongue!

THE END

THAR'S GOLD IN THAT SNOW!

WHISKY was 50 cents a drink in Virginia City, Idaho territory then, but soon to be Montana territory, on New Year's Eve in 1863. However, the alcohol was not rationed.

Smoke came from cabin chimneys. Outside it was 50 degrees below zero. Miners ran to reach saloons. Once inside icicles on their mustaches and beards were brushed off or melted into their drinks.

William Fairweather, one of the discoverers of Alder gulch, from which over $100,000,000 in gold has been taken, came into a saloon and unwrapped a wool muffler from around his face. He threw a buckskin gold pouch on a faro layout and started to high card with the dealer for $500 or $1,000 a turn. He won over $6,000 and bought drink after drink for the house.

Fairweather was an unpredictable character. He had been a captive of Indians that summer, and had struck an Indian medicine man with his medicine bush, but they had let him go.

He started going from saloon to saloon, and a compact body of men staggered around with him. At midnight he went to his cabin for more dust. Those who helped Fairweather drink the New Year in estimated the celebration cost him $10,000.

Fairweather cured expensive headaches the next morning by walking down the street and throwing nuggets into snowbanks. He laughed when men dug into the snowbanks for the raw hunks of gold.

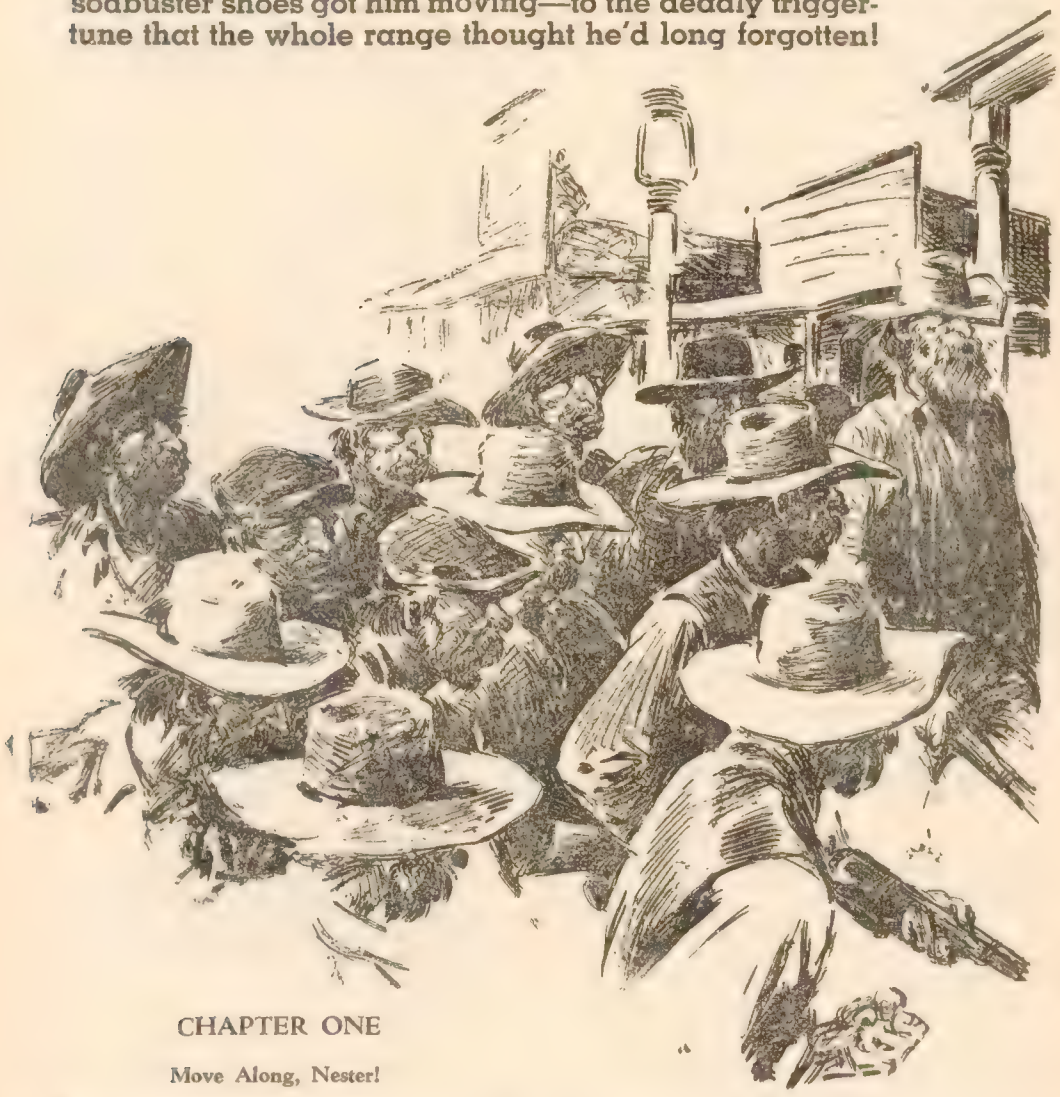
When he ran out of dust Fairweather would clean the riffles of his sluice boxes and fill his buckskin bags with gold. There came a day when his riffles were barren of gold. He tried, but he never made another strike.

Friends took up a collection to pay for his funeral when he died. With William Fairweather, life—and gold—had been "easy come, easy go."

—C. T. Sullivan.

★ ★ THE SHERIFF

When his cowman friends were howling for action against the Sweetwater nester army, Sheriff Spike Carr bided his time—until a nervy ranch girl, a fighting graybeard and two pairs of sodbuster shoes got him moving—to the deadly trigger-tune that the whole range thought he'd long forgotten!



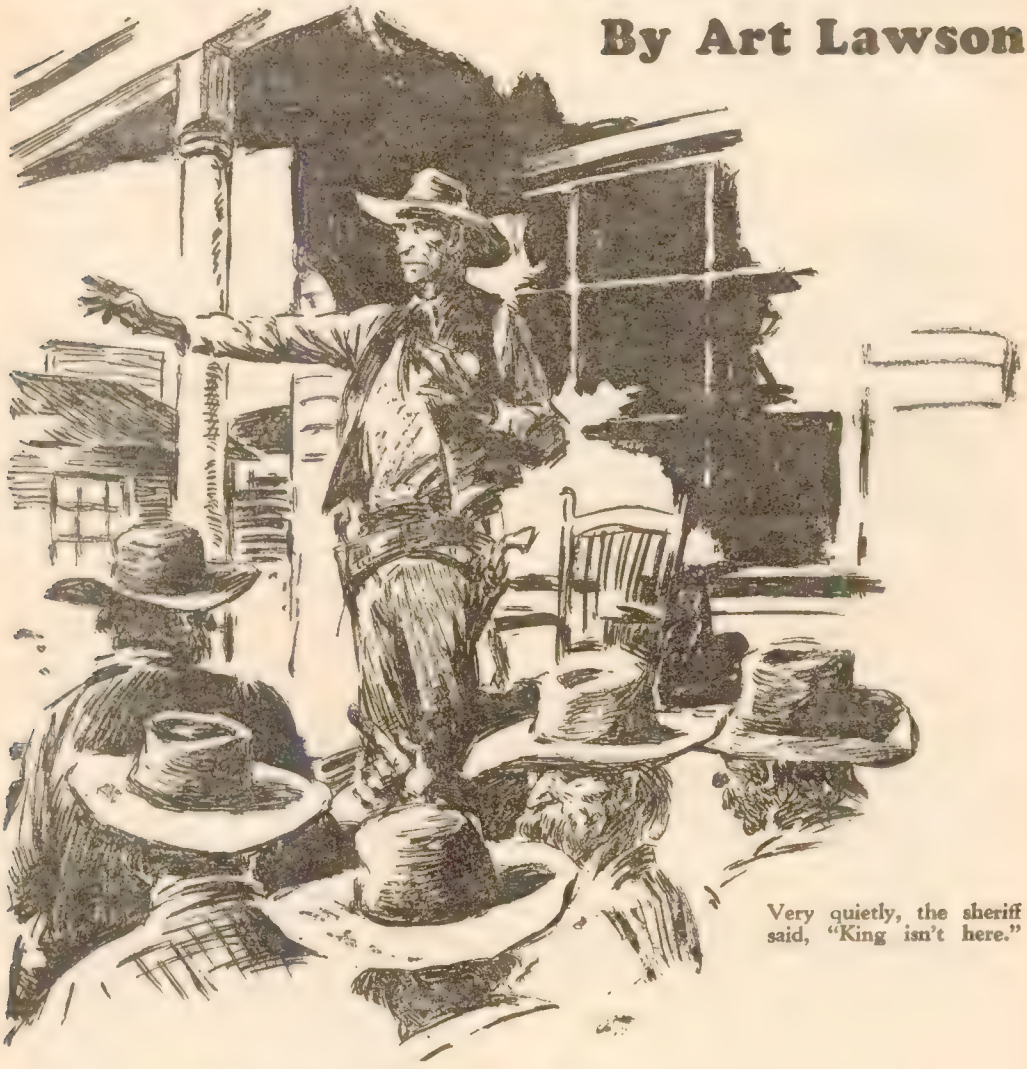
CHAPTER ONE

Move Along, Nester!

SHERIFF Spike Carr sat in his office, his spurred boots planted on top of his desk as he tried to ignore certain unpleasant facts of life. The chief of these facts was that most of the ranchers of the Sweet Fork region were holding a meeting up at O'Halloran's bar, working out a plan that, Spike Carr was sure, would bring a range war to this rich grass country. The second fact was that it would do him no good to go up there and talk to them. They had elected him to office because he was quick with a gun, because he was fearless, because he was young—not because they respected his opinions. They had elected him to do the hard, dangerous work they did not want to do personally. That was some-

BUYS A WAR! ★ ★

By Art Lawson



Very quietly, the sheriff said, "King isn't here."

Stirring Novel of a Fighting Lawman

thing he had not realized until after he had pinned the star to his shirt.

He waited there tensely. He had a bottle of Old Monongahela in the deep bottom right-hand drawer of his desk and thirsted for it mightily. But he did not dare touch it. When show-down came he wanted nobody saying that the Sweet Fork sheriff was drunk.

Presently heels clicked along the thick plank walk. But there was no accompanying song of spurs, and suddenly the sheriff rolled his feet off the desk and sat bolt upright. *They had sent her!*

She came in and stopped in the doorway, an angry flush darkening her pretty cheeks.

"Pa wants to see you," she announced.

"I'll be glad to see him," he replied. "Tell him to come right in."

The girl's eyes were absolutely black. Her hair was dark, too, and there was a brilliant, natural crimson to her lips. Like her old man, he thought, looking at her; mule-headed as sin.

"I didn't vote for you," she said. "I wouldn't have voted for you even if I had been old enough to. But Pa did."

"I heard that he did," Spike said. "I guess by the way he talks, he must of voted for me eight or ten times. Tell him thanks for the boost."

The girl's anger numbed her. She was very beautiful. Even her short nose was lovely, and her rather generous mouth was exquisite.

"All right—" She hesitated, speaking with an effort. "There are forty, fifty men down there at O'Halloran's. Jack Mount, Nick Kroll, Joe Piper, their ramrods—some of the townfolks, too. They all voted for you. You owe them something for that vote."

Sheriff Spike Carr stood up. He was more than six feet tall even without the aid of high cowboy heels. He towered over this girl. She tilted her chin up to him and held her ground. Her black eyes had begun to smolder.

"The day I was sworn in," he said, "I promised to enforce the law to the best of my ability, so help me God. I put my hand on the Bible and made my oath. . ."

"But this—" she cut in quickly. Then she put her voice down, softened it. "This meeting—you should go to it—it would help you to carry out that oath." She caught the start of a smile in his eyes and anger swept her again. "I'll tell them you won't come, then," she taunted him. "I'll tell them you are afraid to face them."

He colored quickly at that. He knew she had said that to force him into going down to O'Halloran's. It was a trick; but he could not now stay away without the whole town believing he had lost his nerve.

He smiled thinly.

"You should have been a wrestler," he told her. "They follow no rules."

She flushed. "The *nesters"*—she made it an ugly word—"have no rules, either—Galahad!"

Then she swung on her heel and turned abruptly away.

HE FOLLOWED her. She was striding angrily up the street, her high heels beating a brisk tattoo on the boardwalk. A couple bare-footed kids watched her go by, pursed their mouths for a whistle, then saw the sheriff coming and stopped just in time.

"Hi, Sheriff," the kids said.

"Hi," the sheriff said. "You kids look like you was getting set for a spitting contest."

The kids grinned foolishly. The girl went straight into O'Halloran's bar without looking around, and the sheriff slowed a little to estimate the number of horses at the rack. They were two deep, good mounts for the most part, as good as you would find in the State. He read some of the brands: KG -Connected, Box M, Wine Glass, Pothook-2. . . . And everybody here tonight would be in a horn-tossing mood.

He could hear the girl's clear voice inside the saloon. "He won't come—"

Quietly he moved ahead and stepped through the bat-wings. The girl must have seen his reflection in the bar mirror, yet she went on talking.

"Lost his nerve—" she said. "Scared of the *nesters."*

She gave the word that ugly twist. Then she stopped suddenly. Nobody was looking at her. They were all staring at the sheriff, solid phalanxes of men at both sides of the wide barroom. O'Halloran, himself, stood down at the far end of the bar, holding a half-empty whisky bottle.

"Snort?" O'Halloran suggested. "On the house, Spike."

"No, thanks," the sheriff said. Near O'Halloran stood a big man who had the same black eyes of that girl, the same black hair, slightly tinged with gray. The sheriff, from the door, smiled grimly. "Your daughter says you wanted to see me, King," he said.

"You changed your mind," King Garret said. He did not ask a question. He gave the answer. It was King's habit to do this and only once before in his life had he been let down. That time was when a daughter had been born to his wife. He had said to his wife, he had said to the doctor: "Make it a boy."

"If you're talking about running off those nesters," Spike said, "the answer is no!"

An odd sighing sound went over the room. King Garret began to roar.

"By God, we elected you to protect our interest! Those nesters are ruining the range, stealing our stock. By God, we'll fire you and elect a man with some guts!"

That was King Garret's way; and the people gathered here in O'Halloran's seemed to think it was the right way. If the sheriff doesn't do the job you hired him for, fire him! And the hell with the law—make your own. The sheriff could see that sentiment in the faces of all of them. He saw it in the scornful twist on the mouth of the girl and in the narrowed eyes of the men. Their noses were wrinkled as if they had just smelled a foul odor.

"I was elected," Spike Carr said slowly, futilely, "to enforce the law. When I find proof that any of those nesters have stolen your stock—"

"Proof? Proof!" King Garret roared the words. "Why, the whole lot of 'em are slow-elking KG beef!"

The sheriff smiled grimly. That was probably true. Beef had been disappearing, but nobody had yet found any sign to link its disappearance with the homesteaders.

"Those nesters," he said doggedly, "are

being used as a blind. They are entitled to—"

He stopped right there. Nobody had interrupted him this time, but why go on? Why repeat the same old story that had already been told too often? According to the law, these homesteaders had a perfect right to stay where they were if they had filed claims and proved them up. The ranchers could do the same, and most of them had filed on the waterholes of the range they claimed. They were pretty secure. But old King Garret, who claimed the best land along Sweetwater Fork, had filed on absolutely nothing. And it was on his land that the nesters were settling.

WHEN the sheriff stalled, King Garret walked stiffly down the aisle toward him. "That so-called law," he said slowly, curtly, "was written by a bunch of flat-footed farmers fresh from their manure piles. But they're not going to law me out of my land." He hesitated, taking a slow, deep breath. He had refused to file even on the land under his own house because he said it would be admitting the validity of the law. His voice rose to a thunderous rumble. "Out here *we're* the law, and you're the man we elected to enforce it. Get rid of those nesters or we'll get rid of them!"

The sheriff stood up against the older man's fury. Even when King Garret patted the hogleg at his thigh the sheriff did not move, nor did a muscle on his face twitch. "And," King added grimly, "we'll get rid of you in the process."

Other men in the room began to mutter, and the sheriff had to shout to be heard above the growing threats.

"Leave them be for a year and they'll crawl out in the night," Spike Carr said. "Let them try to make one harvest and they'll pack up and leave. Too much wind and too little rain already has them ready to go. But if you fight them, they'll fight back. Then they'll never leave."

"The hell with him!" Nick Kroll growled from the rear of the crowd.

"Move over," King Garret snapped. "You're blocking my path." And he meant it in more ways than one.

Sheriff Spike Carr moved aside and King Garret strode past him out into the night. His daughter followed, her eyes straight ahead, her flushed face tight-lipped. But Spike noticed that one corner of her mouth twitched slightly as she moved past him.

For a moment the remainder of the group held back, like a wave about to break on a beach. Then they, too, flooded out. HG-Connected boys following King Garret; then came Jack Mount and his boys, Nick Kroll—all of them. The rattle of spurs and the beat of booted heels on the plank walk gave way to creaking saddles; then came a thunder of hoofs as the cavalcade made up and roared out of town through lamplit streets. An eddy of dust sifted into the bar, gray and diaphanous, marking the floor.

The horses were heading west—heading toward the place where the homesteaders had squatted on rich cattle grass.

The sheriff could not stop them. He could not do anything about it—right now. He turned toward the bar, regarding the rows of bottles below the mirror, the carefully built pyramids of amber-colored bottles. O'Halloran was gathering up glasses, dumping them into a pan, swabbing the worn walnut counter.

"Them fellers are my bread and butter, Spike," he told the sheriff. "You know that. Now get the hell out of here."

CHAPTER TWO

Burned Out!

THE sheriff drifted down the street. He had gone as far as the courthouse when a big wagon drawn by four tired oxen rumbled in from the east. He waited until the wagon had drawn up before him and a tired voice hailed him.

"This Garret Station?" the voice wanted to know.

A child wailed in the wagon and a woman told it brusquely to quiet down. A couple other kids, attracted by the stopping of the wagon, stuck their heads over the front seat. A mangy-looking dog jumped down from the tailgate and went yipping around the wheels, barking shrilly.

"It is," the sheriff told the driver.

"Thank God," the man in the wagon said. "We couldn't of gone much farther."

The sheriff went up to the high front wheel. One of the kids spotted his star and said: "Oh!" The other kid just gaped. The sheriff stiffened his jaw. This homesteader was like all the rest who had come into this country—poor, broken, coming to a land that would not support him.

"It ain't my habit to give advice," he said, trying to put a gentleness into his voice, "but if I was you, I'd fix it to drive on farther."

This homesteader had a shotgun on the wide seat. The baby started to cry again but the woman shut it up without speaking. The sheriff could almost feel that woman in there, pale, tense, listening.

"You threatening me, Sheriff?" the man asked huskily.

"No, damn it!" The sheriff blew up. "But that land out there ain't worth a tinker's dam for farming. Plow up the grass and the topsoil will blow away. That's starvation country."

The homesteader's pale eyes looked very

wise. "Back the road a piece they told me that'd be the story: that our folks wouldn't be liked by the cattle folks. Well, sheriff, I ain't scaring."

You could not talk to a man like that. In their own way, these homesteaders were as bull-headed as old King Garret. You could not talk to either of them; you could only let them butt their heads against the wall until one or the other broke. But somehow, the sheriff had to get this man off the road tonight. Those cattlemen would be back after their night of raiding, and if they found this new outfit on the way they would wreck it.

"So you won't scare," the sheriff said, and his voice went silky. "Well, that's the kind of citizen we want in Garret Station, Mister. You can file a claim tomorrow morning, if you want to, right here in the courthouse. Meanwhile, you better get your outfit off the road—there's an ordnance against camping in the street. Wagon yard's down yonder, a couple squares. Turn in there."

The man acted undecided, and the sheriff guessed the reason.

"Just tell them I sent you," he said. "There ain't any charge."

The man seemed easier, yet still blackly suspicious. Obviously he didn't trust the sheriff, even now.

"What time's the land office open tomorra?" he asked, finally.

"Ten o'clock," the sheriff said.

The man did not thank him, nor did he appear to believe him. He just swung his heavy whip and his four tired beasts went plodding on through the dust. The dog went yipping along behind, too late to get into the wagon.

THE sheriff sauntered down the main street, walking slowly, sniffing out the dark alleys. Garret Station was almighty quiet for this early in the evening. The saloons were deserted, the stores locked up. There were two or three families of nesters in the wagon yard now, and most of them hungry, probably. Since the town constable was with the posse, the sheriff did his job for him, checking the store doors to see that they were locked, and routing out old Willie Shera, who had forgotten to secure his harness shop for the night.

He passed the bank where C. K. Douglass added up figures hoping for a bigger profit than he could reasonably expect from the day's activities. He passed the O. K. Lunch Room and remembered he had not had his supper. He debated whether to go in here or go down to Ma Merriam's, where he boarded. It would be long past supper time down there, but he sort of hankered after Ma's cooking. Finally he went on past the lunchroom.

Ma had kept something on the back of the stove for him, but Ma and the serving girl had both gone upstairs so the sheriff ate his supper standing up in the kitchen.

When he was through, he went into the front parlor. The preacher was there, the station agent, and Charlie Hotchkiss, who ran the Mercantile. They were very quiet tonight with their faces buried in the papers. The sheriff knew he was not wanted there and their silence hit him sharply. He had more sense than to try to break down this barrier, however, so he just passed through the room and out into the night again. There he cursed softly, took a deep breath, and went on, steeling himself against these recent blows. He arrived finally at the courthouse, where he would sleep, he decided, on the cot he kept in his office there.

There was a light in the courthouse so the sheriff went in to his office, instead of making the rounds of the town first. He found C. K. Douglass there, waiting for him. The banker was a short, fat man, and his eyes looked as if they were always studying dollar signs. C. K. had lighted the Rochester lamp over the sheriff's spur-scarred desk and was making himself at home in a wide-bottomed chair nearby. The sheriff went over to his own swivel chair and sat down.

"Heard you and King Garret had a falling out," C. K. remarked.

"Wouldn't hardly say that," Spike said.

"Heard O'Halloran told you you wasn't welcome any more at his bar," the banker went on, persistently.

"Come to think of it," the sheriff admitted, "he did mention something of that sort."

The banker's little eyes gleamed. He fished a couple glasses out of his coat pocket, small, heavy-bottomed glasses, then rose ponderously and rinsed them at the water cooler. After that he took a pint from inside his coat and held it up to the light so the sheriff could see that it had not been opened. Ceremoniously he unwrapped the tinfoil, pulled the cork, sniffed at the contents. Then he glanced across at the sheriff.

"Snort?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do," the sheriff said. He really did not want a drink, and still had an unopened bottle of his own in his deep bottom drawer, but he wanted to know what the banker was cooking up.

The banker poured two drinks, pushed a glass across the desk to the sheriff, put the cork back into the bottle and banged it flat with the heel of his hand.

"To law and order," the banker toasted, lifting his glass. "It's time we had some."

SHERIFF Spike Carr tossed off his drink in one gulp; the banker sipped at his whisky, and for a moment he looked quite smug. After putting up with the cattlemen,

the nester family, and the folks down at Ma's tonight, the sheriff was suddenly struck by the humor of this situation. He began to laugh.

"When did you come out in favor of law and order?" he asked finally.

C.K. looked shocked. "Why—why I was *always* in favor of it. And when I heard how you wouldn't let King Garret bull you down, I decided to come right over here and congratulate you. That's the kind of thing I admire in a man."

The sheriff laughed again. The banker, he knew, never admired anything, unless it meant money in his pocket. But he didn't get this. Most of the nesters were poverty-poor. It would seem that C.K. had a better chance of making money off the ranchers.

C.K. acted as if his feelings had been hurt. He got out his bottle again and pulled the cork. Holding the bottle in his hand, gesturing with it, he insisted: "I'm on the level, Spike, honest. I've always stood for orderly processes of government. I'm in back of you on this all the way. Here, have another snort of this."

"Thanks," the sheriff said. With the refilled glass in his hand, he leaned forward toward C.K.

"Look," he said. "You're a man who knows what goes on below the surface. You're a great student of human nature. Maybe you can help me."

"Why—sure," C.K. said. "That's what I want to do."

The Sheriff said, "King Garret has lost, according to his count, a lot more beef than those nesters could ever eat. His boys haven't found any carcasses on the range, or even any hides. What happened to them?"

C.K. nodded. Then a sudden commotion arose outside and the sheriff stepped past the banker, out onto the walk. The streets were full of townsfolk, women and kids.

"Look, fire!" they cried. "Look at those flames!"

Off to the west the sky was a deep crimson. The flames lifted against the dark, building up and dying out, then growing again with a billow of reddish-gray smoke.

The cattlemen were burning out the homesteaders.

The sheriff ran toward the stable where he kept his horses. Half a dozen kids followed him, yipping excitedly. He turned into an alley to take a short cut near the wagon-yard where the new nester family had holed up for the evening. He was several dozen yards ahead of the kids as he plunged into the dark stable.

Spike Carr never saw it coming. It was a violent blow from behind, and it knocked him out cold. By the time the kids got there, the assailant had made his get-away.

WHEN the sheriff recovered consciousness, he was aware of lantern light in his eyes. He blinked momentarily, then was aware of the kids gathered around him. The stable boy was holding an empty bucket and staring down at him owlishly. The kids all began talking at once.

"They was two of them," one of the kids insisted. "They was three," another said. The sheriff sat up groggily and the kids fell silent.

"Where'd they go?" he asked.

"Out back," the kids answered in unison. "They was grangers."

On his feet, the sheriff felt shaky as a newborn colt. He took the lantern from the stable boy and stumbled to the small rear door of the barn. Here in the soft earth of the yard where a horse trough had overflowed were prints of horses and men, and the most recent of these had been made by broad, flat-heeled shoes. Those were granger shoes, prints made by the men who had ambushed him. But there was something queer about them that made no sense to the sheriff; and his throbbing brain could not seem to concentrate on it.

A thunder of hoofbeats sweeping toward town told him the posse was returning to celebrate their night's work at O'Halloran's. He had been unconscious so long, he reasoned, there was no longer any use in going out to the Sweetwater tonight. So he got rid of his small friends and went back to his office, where he sat in the dark room with his feet on the desk. He could think better in this position; maybe now he could figure out the meaning of those prints in the mud.

But tonight his brain seemed as empty as a nester's bank account. He listened while the commotion outside slowly died out. He heard the cowboys carrying on in O'Halloran's, getting drunk in honor of their ignoble victory. It took no guts for fifty men to burn down the rickety shanties of a few half-fed grangers, to kick apart their scabby pig pens and scatter the skinny hogs over the prairie, to scare a couple dozen half-dressed kids. *By God,* the sheriff thought bitterly, *there's guts for you,* and his own guts writhed, and he was bitterly ashamed of his people.

But that, he thought then, does not stop a war, or bring peace to a range. You can do that only by taking the fight out of people's minds—not by scaring women and kids and getting drunk.

After a time he heard the outside door open, heard footsteps coming boldly down the darkened corridor to his door. Then a girl stood there in the dark shadow of the threshold. He could not see her face, but he recognized her by the curves of her figure in tight denims, by a faint perfume, by the bangles on her Mexican sombrero. He would have known who it was even if he had had his eyes closed, be-

cause he had been half expecting this visit.

"Well, we did it!" she announced triumphantly.

"And now you want me to arrest you," he said dully.

"You don't dare," she said, but he didn't answer her.

"You didn't dare stop us!" she taunted him. "And you don't dare punish us, now that we did it."

"Go on home to bed," the sheriff said wearily.

The girl stood motionless in the doorway. The sheriff rolled his spurs down off the desk and stood up. He was a tall, powerful figure in the darkness of his office; his shoulders wide and hard as rock. But he still felt dizzy, and his head throbbed.

"Your old man sent you down here," he said, finally. "He figured I'd lock you up. He knew if I did, it would blow this whole town into a war. Well, sister, I'm not playing his game."

"He didn't send me down!" the girl answered defiantly.

The sheriff shrugged. He did not know what had come over this girl since he had started bucking her father. He remembered her when she was easy-going, full of laughter. She did not seem to be the same person now—this girl he had thought he might court, some day.

"It makes no difference," he said. "Git!"

She did not move, and he lifted her by the elbows and walked her down the corridor on the tips of her toes. She began to scream, and when she did that he turned her around and clamped his big hand across her mouth. Then something possessed him and he crushed her against himself and kissed her. He was astonished at what he had done. He thought he saw a tear on her cheek; then she wheeled, suddenly, and ran away from him.

The door in the corridor slammed violently.

CHAPTER THREE

Show-Down

THE sheriff was still there in the morning, sitting at his desk, gouging the battered top of it with his spurs. These things came in threes, he told himself, and he was waiting now for the third act; nor did he have to wait long after sun-up. When he heard the heavy rumble of wheels outside, and when the rumble stopped before the jail, he knew that his wait was over. A man's voice lifted querulously. A woman's voice spoke and a baby howled, adding to an excited babble of children's voices.

Heavy boots climbed the courthouse steps. Then there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," the sheriff called indifferently.

A thin, tired-looking man appeared in the doorway. With him were three raggedly dressed children and a woman with a baby in her arms. The baby howled steadily. When they were all inside the room the man spoke angrily.

"They burned us out," he shouted. "And what are you doing? Sitting there on your hunkers, doin' nothin'!"

"Who burned you out?" the sheriff asked mildly.

The baby squalled, and the woman looked uncomfortable The three kids just stared, and the sheriff suddenly realized that the middle one was a girl, and very pretty. He wondered if the girl's ma had been as pretty when she was five years old—or as dirty. The man was shouting again.

"It was the ranchers, damn 'em! Now what are you goin' to do about it?"

"You asked me that before," the sheriff said quietly. "I'm not doing anything—can't you see?" And he studied the man soberly.

The baby suddenly quit howling and the room seemed strangely, ominiously quiet. The nester's courage seeped out of him. He turned, brokenly, to his wife.

"Come on, Nellie," he said helplessly. "This feller ain't goin' to do nothin'."

The woman started to move away as the man shuffled toward the doorway. The little girl seemed fascinated by the sheriff's silver star. The sheriff let them start, then stopped them.

"You recognize anybody?" he asked. "You ready to swear out a warrant?"

The man halted, turned his head sharply around. His pale eyes gleamed momentarily.

The woman said, "Ed—" in a sharp, warning tone.

The man disregarded her. "King Garret," he finally blurted in a husky whisper. "I seen King Garret out there last night. He was leading the raid." The man was getting back his nerve. "Arrest him! Stick him in the jug!" he shouted. "Arson—"

"And when he's safe in the jug you boys will just go up the mesa and run off some more of his beef, huh?" Spike Carr said mildly.

He was looking at the woman, and got his answer from her. She flushed suddenly, but the man began to bluster.

"Now, lissen, I'm an honest man, Sheriff! A church-goin'—"

"You're a damn fool," the sheriff interrupted him curtly. "You can't raise crops in this country—kids either. If you had any sense you'd drift out of here and forget King Garret. Still, if this is the way you want it—" He sighed and fished a paper out of his desk drawer and wrote something on it. "Sign

this," he said, "and I'll fetch King Garret into jail. But you'll have to stick around. You'll have to testify."

The man's fingers trembled as he wrote an "X" in the place the sheriff designated. The baby began to howl again and the woman scurried out with her children tailing after her. The man handed the pen back to the sheriff, a look of cupidity stealing into his gray eyes.

"You think King Garret—uh—would be interested in buying up my claim? You know, if I had just a little money I could sort of drift on to the territory—"

The sheriff wanted to knock the man down.

"All right," he snapped. "Now you can get out of here!"

A COUPLE more nester families had come in from the prairie. They had moved into the wagon yard where they would have the security of their own kind and where the sheriff would pay the parking bill. As Spike Carr trotted past they glowered at him with unconcealed hostility. He laughed bitterly to himself as he rode past them.

He took his big black along Sweetwater Fork, relaxing to the rhythm of its movement, to the sunlight, to the clean dry smell of the early summer air. When he came to the place where the nesters had pitched camp, he found an utter desolation. Their sod shanties had been knocked down or burned out, their fences yanked up and strewn about, their new green crops trampled into loam that looked good now, but would blow away in powder dust long before harvest. The cattlemen had done a thorough job. They had left only the wagons and stock so the nesters could drift on to some place where they would be more welcome.

The sheriff stopped, poked around in the ashes, but found little that would help him: a couple charred home-made toys; burned clothing, smashed plows.

There had been a half dozen families here, their quarter-sections adjoining one another for three miles along the creek, and the sheriff went through the ruins of each, searching carefully. He did not know much about crops but he looked them over, too; and in the crops was the only thing he had found of interest. It seemed to him that even those crops that had not been trampled were doing mighty poorly. Those nesters had known the game was lost long before the cattlemen had raided them.

One thing he noticed everywhere—prints of wide, flat-heeled shoes—nester shoes. But that did not help the sheriff solve the problem of those men who had attacked him last night.

The sheriff stepped back into the saddle around noon to head for the KG-Connected. It was a good fifteen miles to the bluff where the Sweet Water Fork made a wide sweep from the north before turning east toward the Pecos. He passed numberless small bunches of cattle. Some were KG-Connected beeves. Others were Nick Kroll's Wineglass cows down from their home range, where the waterholes were low. There were even some Box M steers, from more than fifty miles away. Long before he reached the KG-Connected the white of the ranch buildings shone in the lowering sun, and the great corrals broke the even green below the bluffs with their symmetrical patterns. Here was the best graze in all this part of the country. Old King Garret had gotten it because he had come here first with a herd from Texas, and so far nobody had screwed up nerve to challenge his ownership by indisputable right of possession.

Cowboys working in one of the corrals watched the sheriff as he passed, but made no response to his greetings. They looked tired, hang-overish. A couple of other cowboys lounging around one of the bunkhouses got up and went inside when they recognized the lawman. When they came back to loaf once more in the shade they wore six-shooters—and the sheriff was sure that they had not had had them on when they went inside.

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HE STOPPED finally near the great porch of the ranch house, which faced the river below the bluff. He dropped reins over the hitchrack, took his time climbing the stairs. When he reached the big front door it opened and the girl stood there before him.

She was wearing a simple cotton dress, square-cut at her throat, the waist tightened snugly above her slender hips. She seemed somehow subdued today, strangely different from the imperious woman she had been last night when he had impulsively kissed her in the dark office. He noticed that her red lips looked swollen, and was wondering about that. Then she spoke, suddenly.

"What do you want?" she asked coldly.

"I have a warrant here," he told her, "signed by a granger. The warrant is for one King Garret—arson, assault, and various other complaints."

"If you're going to be a clown," she said, "why don't you join a circus?"

She was being difficult again. He remembered again that kiss last night and wondered if she remembered; and suddenly this nester who had signed his name with an X seemed very unimportant beside the meaning this girl had for him.

"Well, why don't you answer?" she asked impatiently.

He had not realized he had spent so much time in his dream; nor that it would arouse the girl's curiosity. Her hostility was only surface deep now; somehow, she seemed to have sensed what was in his mind.

"I'll join that circus later," he said dryly. "Right now I'm going to arrest your father for breaking the law."

The girl suddenly reached for his vest and shook him.

"You can't do it, Spike! You mustn't! They'll kill you—"

"Does that matter?" he asked somberly.

"Spike—" Her eyes were pleading, her voice husky.

"When a man has sworn to do his duty—" he began. A sudden growl broke him off, and he glanced past the girl. Old King Garret was standing spread-legged inside the dusky room. Garret had a long-barreled six-shooter holstered at his thigh, the tip of the holster tied down so the gun would not snag.

"Move over, daughter," he commanded brusquely. "Just let's us see how this hombre will perform his duty."

CHAPTER FOUR

Behind the False-Fronts

THIS, the sheriff told himself, was showdown. He hadn't figured on it turning out quite like this, but now that it had, he had to go through with it. But the girl didn't move. She clung stubbornly to the sheriff.

"Please," she begged. "Please, Spike!"

The sheriff shook her hands from his shoulders, but she sprang right back in front of him, her fingers reaching for his gunbelt. He could feel her soft, fragrant hair against his chin, and he tensed as she spoke again, this time to King Garret.

"Cool off, Pa," she said. "You've been boss long enough. You were the law when you first came out here, but times have changed since then."

It would be hard to tell who was most astonished by the remark, the sheriff or King Garret. The sheriff stood immobile. King Garret, who had taken this land from the Indians and now had no intention of losing it to a bunch of sniveling grangers, had already drawn his ancient single action Colt .44.

"By God," he roared, "you stay out of this!"

The sheriff could not see the girl's face, but in some vague way he sensed that she was controlling the old man.

"Pa!" she said again, sharply. Then she left Spike Carr, walked slowly, deliberately, to her father. She went up to him and took his pistol from him, and he let her have it without argument. For a second, then, he looked like an old, broken man, and for a second the sheriff regretted ever having come out here today. There seemed something terribly wrong about beating a man so proud as King Garret; but King Garret was down only for a moment. His dark face was cold and hard as the girl turned and held out the .44 to the sheriff.

"Give it back to him," the sheriff told her curtly.

The girl hesitated, and for a moment a look of fright lightened her eyes. Then she walked slowly back to King Garret and pushed the gun obediently back in his holster.

"We'll talk this over with the judge," the sheriff said quietly. "We'll have a hearing. You want to come along peacable, King?"

King Garret nodded slowly, ponderously. "I'll go," he said heavily, then turned to his daughter, the old spirit flooding back in him suddenly. "And you keep this place goin' till I come back!" he bellowed sternly.

The girl nodded, smiling faintly. "I'll run it, Pa," she said. "Don't worry about that."

She did not dare let the sheriff see the triumph in her eyes while her father was still there, but Spike Carr sensed her feeling, and suddenly was aware of a strange buoyancy from it.

THEY rode at a long, easy lope. When they got to Garret Station night had fallen, and the soft darkness of early summer was warm and pleasant over the land. Heat

lightning flashed in the distance; nearer town, all was quiet save for the chuffing of a switch engine in the railroad yards.

In the wagonyard the nesters were huddled around their camp fires, the kids in bed, the women resting or cradling their babies, the men smoking as if they had never in their lives known violence.

But the sheriff smelled pipe smoke, and knew that it came from good tobacco. And he noticed a bottle being furtively passed among the men and wondered where they had gotten it. They had all been broke a couple days ago, and their credit had been automatically cut off at the Mercantile General Store when Charlie Hotchkiss became convinced they would not make a crop this summer. But the sheriff did not mention this to his prisoner. King Garret was already proddy enough.

The sheriff was consequently surprised when Garret, himself, mentioned the matter down at the courthouse.

"Those nesters were drinking," he said flatly. "Where'd they get it?"

"I don't know. The sheriff shrugged. "But there's no law against it."

"Damn your laws!" King roared. "Where in hell's that J.P.? I want to get out of here plenty damn pronto."

"I'll go find him," the sheriff said. "Guess, though, I better lock you up first, King." The sheriff was joshing, but the older man was unaware of it. Then the sheriff laughed. "Or will you give me your word—"

"The hell with that!" King Garret snapped. "Get old moneybags, too. I'm going to put up bail and go home."

The sheriff went out looking for the J. P. He found C. K. Douglass first, down at the bank, and sent him up to the courthouse. Then he stopped at the Mercantile for a moment to ask old Charlie Hotchkiss where the homesteaders had gotten the tobacco and liquor.

"They paid for it," Charlie told him, "cash money. Now, where in hell do you figure they been keepin' that money hid out? Them nesters owe me—"

But the sheriff wanted no argument tonight.

"Seen the Judge?" he asked impatiently.

"Nope," Charlie said. "But those nesters, now—"

"I'll be seein' yuh," the sheriff said, and headed for the door. A couple cowboys staggered past him into the store. Apparently last night's celebration was still going on, among the Wineglass outfit, at least. They mumbled apologies for banging into him and lumbered up to the back counter. The sheriff, with his hand already on the door-latch, stopped suddenly. Against the east wall he noticed shoe boxes stacked three deep on the store shelves. The boxes were dusty, though not faded, as if they had been there a long time.

"Shoes," the sheriff muttered. "Charlie, you sell them nester any new shoes recently?"

"I ain't ever sold them a pair," Charlie said. "They never had enough money until tonight. But, look, Spike, if I swear out a warrant—"

"I'll arrest them," the sheriff said. "Looks to me like there are a couple pairs missing, Charlie. Who'd you sell them to?"

"Couple strangers," Charlie said. "Mean-looking hombres. About two weeks ago."

"Well," the sheriff said, "drop around any time you want to swear out those warrants," and went out. He wandered upstreet to O'Halloran's bar. The saloon was noisy, packed with cowboys. In the back room the bosses were playing poker and drinking from private bottles. Jack Mount was here, Nick Kroll, Joe Piper, and others. Nick Kroll did not waste any time beating around the bush.

"Looks like you're getting too big for your pants around here," Nick Kroll said brusquely. "Tell King we're saving a hand in our game for him."

"He won't be able to sit in," the sheriff said with suppressed anger, "unless I find the judge to set him bail."

"King's an old fool," Nick said disgustedly.

"The Judge is out back, drunk," O'Halloran reported. "I quit giving him drinks, finally. "I don't know how he got started, or what happened to him. He come in here looking sober as—"

"Who was he drinkin' with?" the sheriff cut in sharply.

"Why, nobody special," the saloonkeeper said. "Only C.K. . . . ."

THE sheriff could not bring J. P. back to consciousness, so he hauled him over to the courthouse and carried him up the steps. King Garret and the banker were waiting for him in his office. King had taken the sheriff's chair and C. K. had taken the other one. Neither got up or said anything.

The sheriff dropped the J. P. on the floor. C. K. seemed nervous.

"If he don't come to," the sheriff said to nobody in particular, "according to the law I'll have to keep King in jail over night." He paused deliberately. "You were drinking with him tonight, C. K.," he said flatly. "Those nesters were drinking, too. They had money."

The banker went white. He muttered: "Listen here, Spike, I never—"

The sheriff was letting them have it straight.

"King," he said, "those hombres who slapped me over the head last night were

cowpunchers. They bought new shoes down at Charlie's some time ago. They wanted me to think they were nesters."

He waited then, carefully awaiting the reaction of these two men, but it did not break the way he had expected. King leaned forward across the sheriff's desk, black eyes staring.

"You'll have to believe me, boy," he said. "I had nothing to do with that ambush. And I don't know a thing about those shoes."

C. K. had realized the implication behind the sheriff's unworded accusation.

"I had only one little drink with the Judge," he insisted. "We were talking about organizing a citizens' committee to back the sheriff. Honest to God, Spike! I never gave those nesters a dime—"

The sheriff almost believed this little man. "Then where'd they get the cash?"

"I don't know," C. K. mumbled. "Look, Spike, I'm for law and order—you can't carry on an honest banking business without law and order." He closed his eyes tightly, as if it would help him think. "The whole damn Wineglass outfit was in this morning, drawing three months' pay. . . ."

"Nick Kroll—" the sheriff began, but he got up no further because the judge on the floor suddenly spoke up. His voice was blurry.

"No thanks, boys," he muttered dazedly. "I had enough to drink. I got to be sober when Spike brings in King—"

They were all staring down at him now, but he didn't move, nor did he speak again.

"Nick's outfit borders yours, King," the sheriff snapped. "His waterholes are dry—"

King said doggedly: "Nick's a cattleman."

"A smart feller could put the nesters against his neighbors," the sheriff said. "He could start a range feud—and when it was all over, he could pick up the pieces."

King Garret lifted dark eyes to the sheriff. "Maybe we better call on Kroll," he said.

"Maybe," the sheriff said dryly, and crossed the room. He heard a muttering of men outside, and suddenly was aware that the honkeytonk piano in O'Halloran's was playing louder than ever. He sensed an ominous movement in the mob outside.

"Stay here, King," he warned, and went on to the double-doorway in the wide hall and opened it, standing at the top of the steps. Below him in the street the nesters had gathered. There were thirty or forty of them, including boys, and all were armed. The leader was Mister X.

"There's a bunch of cowboys down at the saloon planning on busing Garret out of jail," he called out. "We want him."

The sheriff tensed. Then, suddenly, he saw it all. The honkytonk piano was blaring because the men were not there. Kroll's boys were in the alleys—on top of the buildings along Main Street, hidden by the false fronts. They were waiting to open fire!

CHAPTER FIVE

If the Shoe Fits—!

THE sheriff had to get these men off the street and he had to do it in a hurry. Any second now some trigger-nervous cowboy who'd had a drink too many would shoot.

Very quietly, the sheriff said: "King isn't here." Then, slowly, deliberately, he started down the steps towards them. "King Garret put up bail and left," he said.

The men shuffled about uncertainly. In the dim light of the street the sheriff recognized most of them, but some were strangers. And in the rear row were a couple who looked rather young to be grangers.

"Hell," one of the grangers cried suddenly, "there's Garret's horse!"

The sheriff had reached the bottom step. He was only a few feet, now, from Mister X—so close he could smell the whiskey on the man's breath—see the shiftiness of his eyes. Behind the men the rest of the group was just as uncertain, just as befogged with drink—and any second now the punchers on the roofs would open up with their carbines.

Mister X was sneering. "He ain't down to the Mercantile," he said boldly. "He's in there. We've had a man watchin'."

The sheriff shrugged. "Okay," he said. "Have it your own way. Go in and take him. I was only trying to save you hombres some grief. There's a cowboy on every roof in this town, one in every alley, with rifles."

It was a bold way to play it, because it might have set off the holocaust. But by some miracle, it did not do so. The sheriff felt a movement run through the mob. Silhouetted heads appeared along the tops and sides of false-fronts. The two men who had stood in the rear of the crowd began edging away.

"And by the way," the sheriff still spoke in that calm, almost emotionless voice, "where'd you get the drinking liquor?"

One of the men gestured with his head towards the rear." A couple new fellers—"

Then a granger shouted: "By God, he ain't lying! We'd better—" He began to run. One of the strangers lit out, too, and the other howled something that sounded like a signal. The Sheriff tensed.

A gun barked somewhere, and behind the sheriff old King Garret began bellowing in his bull voice. A head behind one of the false-fronts vanished with a shrill yell. Other guns blasted and the nesters broke and scattered. The sheriff went after the two men in bib overalls. He got one of them in that first flurry of gunfire, then ran swiftly past him

into an alley and shot the other. A third man in the alley got away.

Old King Garret continued bellowing from the courthouse. "Come on out in the open and fight like men!" he roared angrily.

But there were no takers. The nesters had vanished. The cowboys in the alleys and on the roofs had been instructed to help rescue King Garret. And the two men who had been paid to kill him, had, in the excitement, been shot down by the sheriff.

"I'm backing you, King," little C. K. squealed. "We've got to get law and order!"

The sheriff groped around in the alley until he found the two men in bib overalls, but both were dead. He had no way of identifying them, but he did not one thing. Both of them wore flat-heeled, new shoes. . . .

THE sheriff crossed the street to O'Halloran's, where King Garret, accompanied by the banker, joined him.

"Let me handle this," the sheriff said, as the other two fell in behind him. They crossed the deserted bar-room, came to the door leading to the back room, and found it ajar. The sheriff kicked it open. O'Halloran was in there, and so were the half dozen men who owned or operated the great ranches in this section. They were seated around poker tables.

"I'd think—" the sheriff spoke slowly—"you hombres would take more interest in civic affairs. Or haven't you heard the news?"

Nick Kroll was cocky. "We been saving a hand for you, King. Glad to see you're out. Move over, Sheriff, and let him in."

The sheriff did not move, and Nick Kroll laughed. "I sent my boys out to keep an eye on the nesters," he said. "Heard the homesteaders was going to take you out of jail tonight, King. Fooled 'em, didn't we?"

Nick Kroll's cockiness was slipping from him. The sheriff had come in here with quite a load of gear. He had two gunbelts besides his own, each weighted with holstered revolvers. He also had a big fistful of money. Nick tried not to notice these things, but his glance kept straying to them furtively. The sheriff did not hurry him.

He placed the gunbelts on the poker table, then the stack of bills.

"These guns," he said slowly, "belonged to hired killers." Then he pointed to the money on the table. "And this dinero paid for these killers." He added a little packet of white pills to the exhibit. "Pills like these knocked out the Judge, so he couldn't set bail for King Garret." He paused, eyeing Nick Kroll. "Well, both those killers are up an alley now, dead." Nick Kroll's eyes blinked. "Nick, you better come along with me."

"I had nothing to do with it!" Nick Kroll blurted. "They were lying. Ask C. K. I haven't drawed that much money in years."

"Your boys all drawed an extra two months' pay," C. K. put in. "It could have been pooled."

"Nick," the sheriff said, "there's no sense bluffing."

He said it so calmly, so certainly, Nick Kroll could not believe, at first, that the sheriff himself wasn't bluffing. Then he realized his mistake. The lawman stood at the table, riffling through the bills, counting them. Nick figured his chances—and made his quick decision.

His hand darted down, but his Colt's muzzle never cleared the table-top. The sheriff had dropped the money, and even while the bills were fluttering down he tipped up one of the revolvers on the table, one of the guns that Nick Kroll had hired—and shot Kroll through the head. . . .

IT was nearing midnight when hoofs thundered into town again. A cavalcade swept down Main Street and up to the courthouse. This time it was the whole KG-Connected outfit, led by a very frightened girl.

She broke in on a clubby little scene in the sheriff's office. The sheriff had produced the bottle he had been hoarding in his bottom drawer, and he and C. K. and King Garret were approaching the bottom of it.

"Have a drink?" King suggested mildly.

The girl shook her head.

"You'd take a drink if you were the man you should have been!" King roared at her.

Then she shouted back at him. "But I'm not a man!" she yelled. "I'm a woman." Then she moved up closer to the sheriff, and her voice dropped. "I was so afraid—I thought those nesters would do something. When King didn't get back I rounded up the boys—and, well, when we passed those nesters going back, we thought it was over."

There would be plenty of time to tell what had happened. Right now all the sheriff wanted was to hold her hand. He took it.

"They're not going back. They're leavin," the sheriff said quietly. "And it's just as well you brought the boys in. We were going to send for them. Tomorrow they're filin' on every other section along the Sweetwater."

King Garret took a deep breath. That was a farmer's law, a law not to be obeyed. But it would secure the great KG-Connected—

"If you can let go of that filly long enough to pass me the bottle," he growled at the sheriff, "I'd shore appreciate it."

But the sheriff was busy. He let the banker pass the bottle.

THE END

★ ★ HANGIN' HOBBS'

Tensely Dramatic Novel of a Blood-Mad Town

By Frank Bonham

Hangin' Hobbs, folks said, loved a gallows-charivari almost as much as he did a juicy steak. . . . But when the famous executioner arrived at feud-torn Kingbolt to measure his 13th victim, he faced the grim choice of knotting that noose around the neck of an innocent man, or of feeling it strangling his own tough throat!

CHAPTER ONE

Buckshot Killer

HANGIN' HOBBS arrived in Kingbolt on the afternoon stage, the taste of dust in his mouth and a look of business in his eye. His bags were the last to come out of the boot—the brown gladstone and the telescope which held Rectifier, his favorite hang-rope. The conductor's manner as he set them down was stiff, just short of hostile.

Marshal Gus Hobbs, from Three Rivers, did not resent it. He was used to this attitude on the part of laymen. They looked upon hangmen somewhat as they did upon undertakers—as men in a respectable, but unpleasant, business; a business of which most men wanted no part, but which had to be done.

Hangin' Hobbs position was slightly different. The story went that he would hang anyone in New Mexico for twenty-five dollars and traveling expenses. The fact that he was here in Kingbolt, outside his own bailiwick, seemed proof enough to the stage man.

Hobbs asked, "Where will I find the sheriff's office?"

The conductor nodded his head. "Off the plaza, on Cavalry Street."

"Thanks," Gus Hobbs grunted as he stooped to pick up his bags, a corpulent man dressed in dusty, decent black.

Sheriff Sid Priest was just leaving his office when the marshal approached. He smiled quickly, a smile of relief as much as welcome. He immediately took Hobbs inside and put the bags in a corner. "Just going down to the Buckhorn for a steak," he said. "We'll talk about it there."

The talk was trifling as they ate, but after he had pushed his plate away the hanging marshal belched once and launched into business. "There's just one thing I like to know before I take a job," he stated. "How come you're backing out? This the first time you've come up against an execution?"

Sid Priest picked his teeth, slowly shaking his head. He was a man of forty, strongly made, baldish, and with cold, hard eyes.

THIRTEENTH KNOT ★

Ott gave a frightened gasp, and froze.

"Off and on," he said, "I've been trading lead and insults with badmen for fifteen years. I've sent twelve men through the trap in that time."

Hangin' Hobbs smiled and began to nod, a gold tooth shining at the corner of his mouth. "The thirteenth man," he said, "almost buffaloed me, too. Just as a matter of professional advice, Priest, I'd recommend that you hang this man whether you like it or not. The thirteenth ain't going to haunt you any more than the first."

"That's easy said," the sheriff remarked. "But—well, Jerry Clain's only twenty, and that don't make it easier. I'd rather pay the twenty-five and throw in a bottle of booze for you afterwards. If you're like me, you'll need it."

Hobbs shrugged. "A hanging," he declared, "can be beautiful. It can be quick, and clean, and—well, dignified. The preacher dronin' a few words, the crowd quiet as midnight while I adjust the noose, and then that bass-fiddle snap of the rope." He sighed. "Shore; I'll take the job if it's got you whipped. What about young Clain?"

"A messy thing," said Sheriff Priest, ruminatively. "He got a kid crush on old Charley Banning's daughter, Barbara. Jerry was only a forty-a-month buckaroo on Charley's place, and Charley fired him when it looked like Barbara was falling for him. Jerry

came back one night to elope with her, and he ran into Banning a mile from the ranch. There was some trouble, and Charley got it in the belly with a scattergun. One of Banning's neighbors ran across the boy standing beside the body."

Hangin' Hobbs frowned. He had china-blue eyes, as friendly as those of a homeless dog, but they could take a quick, bright glaze. "What," he inquired, "was a cowpuncher doing with a sawed-off shotgun?"

Sheriff Sid Priest's eyes were busy with a cigarette. "Abe Wolfert, our county prosecutor, brought it out that it meant the murder was premeditated."

"Rubbish! The Colt is the cowpuncher's weapon. Not one in forty owns a scattergun."

Priest looked up. He said mildly, "Clain's been tried and sentenced, Marshal. We're only hangin' him, now."

Gus Hobbs' big shoulders, inordinately large for a man hardly five feet six, lifted in a gesture of carelessness. "Sure," he said. "That's your business. I'll go back with you and size up Clain. I may have to make some alterations in your scaffold, if he don't heft right. I don't like 'em to dance like a monkey on a string."

JERRY CLAIN was about one-sixty, tall and slender—good hanging material, reflected Gus Hobbs. He stood in the cell door with his glance running a cool, quick appraisal; Jerry Clain lay on his bunk, a cigarette in his lips as he returned the marshal's stare.

Hobbs' mind instantly put the condemned man into a mental pigeon-hole labelled: *Hard-Case Kid Type.* Jerry Clain had regular features, but they were surly; a fine, square mouth, but it was pulled down at the corners; clear eyes, yet they were filled with cynicism.

Clain said: "Howdy, Marshal. Make yourself at home."

Hobbs introduced himself. "The sheriff seems to be a trifle superstitious," he explained. "Rather than hang his thirteenth man himself, he's hired me to do it." He opened his telescope bag while he stood there, and the thing he now pulled out caused Clain to start up from the bunk. "Excuse me," Hobbs said mildly. "Rectifier does give some fellers the shakes. But I just thought I'd see how the knot snugs in—if you've got no objections."

He took only one step towards the boy, and then Jerry Clain was on his feet with his palms against the wall, a snarl in his voice. "Keep away from me with that damn thing! So help me, if you come any closer I'll kill you!"

Hobbs murmured, "Sho', now!" but he put the rope away.

Jerry Clain sank down upon the bunk. Hangin' Hobbs, studying him, knew he had come to that point at which a man often breaks at the slightest show of kindness. He had taken many assignments such as this one, but in all his experience he had had to hang only two men, and these were murderers who had been taken red-handed at their crimes. Hobbs' nature revolted at the remembrance of even those grim incidents, for his heart was of the texture of a lump of butter on a hot T-bone.

It was funny about hangings. Take even a kind-hearted sheriff, one who hated to kill anything less vicious than a sand-rattler: When the time came to drop his man he generally found the iron in his soul to carry him through. But when he had the slightest doubt of the condemned man's guilt, he backed off. He resigned or sent for another man to do the job.

Around New Mexico word had gone out that Marshal Gus Hobbs loved a hanging as much as he did a two-inch steak. More and more he was called from the tranquility of his own little bailiwick of Three Rivers to hang some man of whose guilt the sheriff would finally admit he was not certain.

With Sheriff Sid Priest it was different, and yet Gus Hobb's mind had already picked up a scent. . . .

"Sonny," he said, "I ain't noways sure you're as hard as you want me to think."

Jerry Clain spun his cigarette across the room. It could have been an accident that it struck the marshal's boot. He said, "I'll bet if you was to sing, 'M-O-T-H-E-R Spells Mother' I'd break right down and bawl. Like hell!"

HOBBS glanced down the hall. Sid Priest was not within hearing. He went close to young Clain, smiling the gentle smile that had softened the Llano Kid, after even a priest had failed to soften him. "Clain," he said, "I don't think you killed this Charley Banning. Do you want to tell me about it?"

Of a sudden the condemned man made a lunge for the marshal's Colt. Hobbs met him with a fist that jolted him to the heels and sat him rudely down on the floor. But Clain could still snarl.

"You damned old four-flushing neck-stretcher!" he swore. "I didn't ask you to nose in here. I wouldn't talk on the stand, but I will now; I'm saying I blew Charley Banning's belly open and laughed as he lay there. He told me he'd throw me off, if I ever came courting his daughter again. Well, I came back, and I reckon I showed him."

Hobbs' face hardened, his chin pulling in, eyes snapping. "All right, mister, if that's how you want it! When a wolf chooses to run

alone, nobody in the world can help him. I'll see you Friday, Clain—on the scaffold!"

He spun on his heel with that and went out into the early night. Outside he lighted a cigar, but the taste of it was like sawdust. He felt suddenly trapped; as though he were the man who needed a pardon, not Jerry Clain. Maybe this would teach him not to go galivanting all over the Territory, with the sublime faith that he would never stub his toe.

Hangin' Hobbs knew he was about to be made a jackass. By his own admission, Clain was guilty. But Gus Hobbs could no more hang him than he could scratch his neck with his elbow. Unless something turned up quick, he was going to have to run out on this job. . . .

He started towards the Apache Hotel. As he did, his gaze was caught by a girl standing near the entrance; he had an eye for nicely turned ankles and pretty faces, and this girl had both. When he was almost to the door she said, "Marshal Hobbs?"

Hobbs nodded, and the girl said, "I'm Barbara Banning."

Gus Hobbs told her, "If you're trying to help Jerry Clain I'll talk to you. Otherwise I already know enough to hang him."

"I'm trying to help him," the girl said. "Will you come with me and talk to someone who has some facts you ought to know?"

Hobbs sighed. "I'd give my whole fee to talk to somebody like that," he declared.

CHAPTER TWO

Eleven Good Men and True

THE town of Kingbolt was one of those quiet little river settlements, half Mexican and half white. Ancient cottonwoods and chinaberries shaded the streets and the large plaza, where, on Saturday nights, a Mexican orchestra played songs that caused the *abuelos* to dream and the young ones to dance. The stage restaurant was on one corner of the plaza; above it, on the second floor, was the office of Tom Clain, attorney-at-law.

Barbara Banning had told Hangin' Hobbs some things as they walked there from the hotel. "Jerry didn't shoot Dad—I know he didn't!" she declared. "He's just trying to shield his brother, Tom. Tom had had trouble with my father, too—I guess everyone had—and I think Jerry believes Tom did the killing. He's just trying to protect him."

"Can't Tom Clain stand on his own two feet?" Hobbs grumbled.

"I guess you don't know much about Kingbolt, Marshal Hobbs," the girl said quietly. "I'll let Tom give you the details. But the thing is, Tom is running for county prosecutor against Abe Wolfert, and if any suspicion of scandal touched him, he'd be finished."

They were climbing the narrow, dark stairs, the marshal's brows tugging in. "You mean Jerry thinks an election is more important than his own neck?"

For a moment Barbara Banning was quiet. Then: "I believe Jerry thinks that if his brother really did it, he'll confess before they can hang him, and that if Tom isn't guilty, nobody can save him anyway."

Tom Clain was probably ten years older than his brother, a tall, dark-haired man with deep-set, worried eyes. In his office there was a carved juniper desk, a case of cowhide-covered legal books, and a few chairs. Gus Hobbs took the chair he was offered and while he lighted a cigar he studied the lawyer covertly.

Finally he ventured, "So you're running against Abe Wolfert. Reckon you've got any chance?"

Clain shot him a quick, humorless glance. "I'll poll ten votes to his one, if I'm not jobbed."

"Who'd job you?" Hobbs asked.

Clain stood up and began to walk up and down. Finally he said: "You did us a big favor in coming here, Marshal. I know your reputation, but I also happen to know about Jim Dublin, up in Mojave, and a few others you never got around to hanging. I'm going to tell you everything, just like you were a doctor—and believe me, I'm plenty sick enough to need one. If that kid brother of mine hangs—"

He broke off and fashioned a cigarette with long, nervously agile fingers. "Kingbolt is a sick town, Hobbs," he went on. "There's a leech fastened onto its jugular vein and it's sucking the place dry of blood. I'm talking about Mayor Max Herman. Herman got the council to pass some tax laws about two years ago, taxing every cowman in the county for grazing privileges. He made them retroactive to five years ago, so that nobody in Kingbolt can pay. One by one he's taken the ranches around here for non-payment of taxes; and somehow he always manages to get title to them himself, claiming he's paid up the back taxes. He hasn't, but we haven't been able to prove it.

"He owns Abe Wolfert, the county prosecutor, and Sheriff Sid Priest, and that means we're hamstrung. Wolfert and Priest are getting their cut out of it, of course. But if I could knock Wolfert out from under him, I could expose the whole thing in a week. I'd have access to all those records I need. Tomorrow Kingbolt votes, and Wolfert goes out—if we can keep control of the polls."

"How does this affect your brother?" Hobbs inquired.

Clain sat down again and began to pencil black marks on his desk blotter. "Jerry was

framed; I'm convinced of that. Even though he confessed, the jury took a week to convict him. On the first ballot it was eleven-to-one for acquittal. By the end of the week it was twelve-to-one for conviction. It doesn't make sense."

Barbara Banning had sat with her fingers tensely linked the whole time Tom Clain talked. "The only chance for Jerry," she said now, brokenly, "is for Tom to be elected. He can set the execution over a week, and by that time the whole thing will be exposed."

"I reckon the thing for us to do," said Hangin' Hobbs, "is to see that none of Wolfert's ballots get counted twice. I'll drop over to the polls tomorrow night and keep an eye on things, Clain."

In the morning he walked over to the courthouse to visit Mayor Max Herman. Then he had a sudden inspiration and changed his course for the records section. By virtue of a cigar wrapped in a ten-dollar bill, he persuaded the venerable custodian to produce the record of balloting in the Clain trial. Hobbs was mighty curious about the man who had held out for conviction on the first ballot.

On a piece of paper he wrote the name: "Earl Ott, D.D.S." and departed with his cigar gripped grimly in his teeth.

UPSTAIRS in an office overlooking the plaza Gus Hobbs found Mayor Herman. Herman sat behind a desk which served him as the mouth of a cave might serve a grizzly. He looked too fat, too slow, too stupid to be much of a threat, but the real menace of the man lay in his eyes, which were both avaricious and ruthless. His hands rested flaccidly on the arms of his chair; his features were loose and blotchy, and he spoke in a rough-edged baritone.

"You the hangman?" he inquired.

Hobbs nodded. He was about to state his business when Herman turned his head toward an open door behind him. "Abe," he called.

Abe Wolfert appeared in the doorway, a lean, hungry-looking individual, with a close-cropped black beard. Herman said, "Get a hundred out of the safe for Hobbs, Abe."

"The fee's twenty-five, plus twenty dollars stage fare and meals," Gus Hobbs remarked.

Herman's lips pulled into a smile. "The extra is on the town," he said. "Just keep your mind on your work, Hobbs, and don't listen to a lot of loose talk, is all we ask."

Hobbs sat down. "It's too bad I didn't talk to you before," he said. "I've already been listening to some loose talk. It was about you, Mayor."

Annoyance smudged Max Herman's gray eyes. "That damned Clain!" he stated. "What cock-and-bull story did he give you?"

"Something about taxes," said the hanging marshal briefly.

Abe Wolfert snorted. "Pah! Show me the rancher who doesn't crab about paying a dollar or two for taxes, and I'll show you a dead one."

The man from Three Rivers blew cigar smoke at the low ceiling. "Retroactive taxes are something else again," he stated quietly.

Mayor Max Herman stood up. He held the money out in his pudgy fingers. "If I need you or your opinions," he said crisply, "I'll send for you. Good morning."

Hangin' Hobbs put the money in his pocket. He grinned, touching his forehead in salute, and turned to leave. On the way out he stopped before a large wall map of Dona Maria County. He glanced at the ranches round about Kingbolt, noting how, in many cases, the original owners' names had been inked out and the ranches stamped: "Sold for Taxes." He saw Herman's name on several of these defunct irons, Priest's on one, and Abe Wolfert's on two others. He was on the point of going out when he saw, on the Cross Anchor ranch, the name of a new owner: Earl Ott.

Mayor Herman growled, "Something interesting, Marshal?"

Hobb's gold tooth showed briefly in a smile. "I was just wondering," he said, "how Ott finds time to run cattle, what with being a dentist. I guess I'll drift over and ask him."

He closed the door on two startled faces. Ott, he suspected, was a touchy subject.

Dentist Earl Ott had a patient when the marshal arrived in his ante-room. He opened the door a crack to smile, "Five minutes, friends." Then the pale eyes noticed the marshal's nickel shield, and the smile departed and left a thin, startled face in which fear showed naked, a face with little strength, with a weak chin and a long, slender nose.

When the patient had left, Hobbs went in and sat in the operating chair. Earl Ott, D.D.S., occupied himself with putting instruments away, not meeting the stout man's glance.

"I'm Gus Hobbs," the marshal said. "Maybeso you've heard of me?"

"I reckon," Ott grunted. "Toothache, Marshal?" He ventured a hopeful glance.

"Nope. Headache. I'm going to hang an innocent man day after tomorrow."

Ott confronted him quickly, divining the purpose of the visit and throwing up a hasty defence. "Now, look, Marshal . . . just because I happened to be on the jury don't mean—"

"You weren't *on* the jury," Hobbs rapped. "You *were* the jury! What did you do during that week the jury was out—drill holes in their teeth till they all sided with you about hanging young Clain?" His voice was con-

temptuous, bullying. With each word, Ott seemed to flinch.

"I merely pointed out holes in the defense's story," the dentist faltered. "I reminded them that Clain had confessed. They—they finally came around."

"You mean," Hangin' Hobbs barked, stabbing with his cigar, "that you wore them down like a drill, harping at them night and day, day after day, rubbing that phoney confession into their brains until they got softheaded and agreed with you!"

Ott's back stiffened. "You've got no right," he whined, "to come around accusing—"

"I ain't accusing," Hangin' Hobbs said. "I'm just speculating. I'm wondering how you happened to come into possession of that Cross Anchor Ranch at about the same time Jerry Clain was sentenced."

"I bought it," Ott said quickly, "as an investment." He had unconsciously taken out a handkerchief and was nervously balling it.

There was none of the gentleness in Hangin' Gus Hobbs, now, that had comforted so many harried men. He was the hanging marshal New Mexico Territory had made into a legend—bullying, threatening, badgering, hungering after necks to stretch.

"Ott," he snapped, "I've got a pet investment, too. It's a hang rope I call Rectifier, because it's straightened out more grief than all the juries in the Territory. I've got a funny notion that unless you come around and do some talking in my ear before Friday, Earl Ott, D.D.S., may be the one that gets rectified."

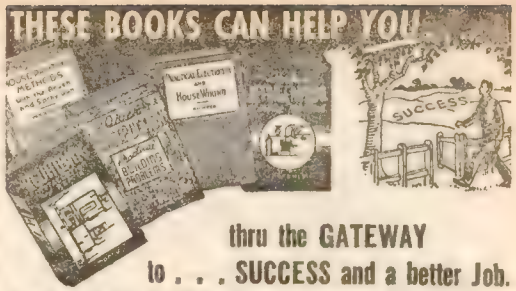
CHAPTER THREE

Kingbolt Votes in Lead

AT NOON, voting started. By midnight, Dona Maria County would have a new prosecutor, or else it would retain Abe Wolfert, and Jerry Clain would die on the scaffold.

From mid-day on, a steady stream of voters filed into the stage station, where votes were being polled for half the county. From all the little ranches and settlements for many miles around, men came on horseback and on wagons to do their bit to pry the octopus loose.

Hobbs was in and out all day, watching for any finagling around the ballot box. The sheriff was there too, smelling of liquor, lending an air of authority. Night came down the river; in the cantinas around the plaza lights blazed and men drank to their candidate, and most of the toasts were to Tom Clain. Mayor Max Herman and his crew were on the way out.



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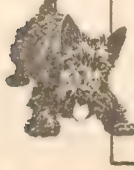

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At midnight, the ballot box was unlocked in the presence of Max Herman, Tom Clain and a few other men. Hobbs sat in the back, saying nothing, missing nothing. Because of his position, he was the first to notice the two men who crossed the street from the plaza to enter the stage station.

He was standing when they came through the door, and his voice went out sternly. "You ain't needed, boys."

They were unshaven, nondescript men whose eyes searched the place rapidly. One of them lifted his chin in recognition when he found the stocky, overfed lawman. "Lookin' for you, Marshal," he said.

He came toward him, but the man behind stood still, and suddenly there was a gun in his hand. The gun tipped up and filled the room with an eruption of thunder that hammered at the ears. The lamp disappeared from its ceiling hook. The room went black.

Hobbs stood squarely in place. He said sharply: "Clain—get back here!"

He heard the attorney moving back through the darkness. The others were beginning to mill, yelling with a rising panic. Sheriff Priest bawled, "Nobody touch the ballot box!"

Apart from all the turmoil stood Gus Hobbs. Tom Clain reached him. "The pigs!" he said. "The dirty, ballot-robbing pigs!"

In the blackness of the front wall, the door was a gray rectangle. It was broken suddenly by the form of a man departing hurriedly; almost immediately the man was back, a large box held in his arms. Gus Hobbs strode purposefully down the wall. He was beside the door as the man entered; the barrel of his long Frontier Colt impressed a groove across the top of the intruder's head. Hobbs caught the false ballot-box before the man fell; he planted his foot in the sagging gunman's belly and gave him a boost that hurled him clear of the walk and into the street. The ballot box landed beside him, to spill an avalanche of paper into the dirt.

Someone was coming from the back, now, bearing grimly down upon the marshal. Gus Hobbs' eyes were beginning to focus in the semi-darkness, showing him where the menace lay, so that he was able to block the downswing of a Colt and counter with a backhanded swipe of his own gun across the other's ear. He heard the man groan and go down, the stolen ballot-box under his arm.

Sheriff Priest's voice came from the middle of the room. "Marshal! Where are you?"

"Right here," Hobbs returned. "You can light a lamp, now. I laid out a couple of 'em, but I'm afeard they got away with the ballots."

The hubbub in the stage office began to subside. A match scraped into yellow flame, and

Tom Clain could be seen bending over a glass-chimneyed wall lamp. The hanging marshal's first glance at Sheriff Sid Priest showed a glint of satisfaction in the cold-eyed lawman's face. Then Priest came forward.

"Now, ain't this tough, though," he grumbled. Then he saw the gunman lying on the floor with the ballot box at his side; his gaze lifted through the door and he made out the second fallen warrior. Shock blanked his features for a moment. Then he said loudly: "Well, this is short pretty! They were trying to switch ballot boxes on us, Clain! That must be the real one in the street. You dropped this hombre as he was bringing in the dummy, Hobbs."

TOM CLAIN'S eyes were desperate. There was no way of telling which box was which, and he knew that a mistake now could cost him the election. But the aft lawman from Three Rivers was smilingly shaking his head.

"You got 'em twisted, Sheriff. They never got the real box outside."

Priest's jaws set. "I took a good look at the box this afternoon—and this ain't it!"

Hobbs shrugged. "Easy enough settled. I took the liberty of pinning my badge onto a ballot and dropping it in the box before the balloting started. If this is the real box, it'll be on the bottom."

Fury swirled in Sid Priest's eyes, but he could only stand aside while Tom Clain jubilantly unlocked the ballot box and dug under the mound of folded papers. Triumphantly, the lawyer pulled up a ballot with Hobbs' shield pinned to it!

"While we're at it," Hangin' Hobbs remarked, "we might as well get to countin'."

The tabulating took until three o'clock. Hobbs spent part of the tedious hours in a saloon, eating cheese sandwiches and drinking beer. He went back as they were pasting a large sheet of wrapping paper on the inside of the stage office window with the results of the voting on it. It read:

Tabulation of Votes for Kingbolt, Sacaton, Picacho, and Cordillero

Abe Wolfert..... 392
Thomas R. Clain.....1846

In his office, Clain strode up and down the floor, full of plans and enthusiasm. Barbara Banning's face was flushed with excitement.

"I'll bust Herman's game open like a ton of dynamite!" Clain vowed.

"But the first thing you're going to do," said Barbara, "is get Jerry out of jail."

"That," Clain said, "will be the easiest job of all. I'll demand a retrial and see that he's

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acquitted on grounds of insufficient evidence."

Hobbs sat in a chair with his hands clasped over his stomach. "All the votes in yet?" he asked quietly.

Tom Clain blinked. "A little over half," he admitted. "But Herman's real strength was right here. Half the towns in Dona Maria County voted here in Kingbolt. The rest are voting in Hondo; that's forty miles east, across the hills. They'll send the ballots in a locked box, by wagon. The wagon should reach Apache Springs station by tomorrow night, and in the morning the regular stage will bring them on in. I expect a landslide from Hondo, Marshal."

But as Marshal Gus Hobbs prepared for bed, he did not feel so certain of victory.

IN THE morning, Kingbolt had news to put the election out of their minds. While the town slept, Jerry Clain had worked a bar out of the adobe sill of his cell window and escaped.

Sheriff Sid Priest organized a posse which combed the bosque of the Big River, flowing turbidly southward between low banks of willow and cottonwood. He sent men up onto Black Mesa, south of the town, but in all that flat expanse of lava-land, not a speck was to be seen. He personally bulled through every saloon back room in town. But Jerry Clain was gone.

Hangin' Gus Hobbs went down to the Buckhorn Cafe for lunch, but he ate without relish. Trust a wild-eyed kid to pull one like this! Busting jail was worse than confessing, and Clain had already done that. He was doing everything in his power to make it tough to save him.

Probably it was too late, now, although there was little chance of Clain's having broken down. Somewhere, under some building or in a deserted barn, he was doubtless waiting, without food or water, for an opportunity to make good his escape.

Hobbs looked up as two men halted beside his table. On the faces of Mayor Max Herman and Prosecutor Wolfert was bleak unfriendliness. They sat down. Herman's pouchy, mottled features had some new lines pinched into the skin around his eyes. Wolfert kept scratching his short beard as he stared at the marshal.

Herman said, "There's a disease known as Proboscitis that's killed off quite a few gents around here, Hobbs. It's a malady characterized by the sufferer stickin' his nose into other people's business. You show some of the symptoms yourself."

"I'm immune," declared Hobbs bluntly. "I've been exposed to it too many times."

"I wouldn't bet on that," murmured Abe Wolfert.

Max Herman took a legal paper from his coat pocket and laid it on the table between them. "Hobbs," he said, "I'm accustomed to paying for what I get. I don't ask favors of any man. This paper is an eviction notice on the XR ranch, across the river. It's forty sections of the best graze that ever a steer chawed on. I'd like to make you a present of it. I'd also like to see you make a trip today—to Three Rivers. Don't bother to come back. You can hang onto the ranch a few months and sell for a nice profit."

"I couldn't afford a ranch around here," Hangin' Hobbs said innocently. "The taxes would break my back."

Herman was without humor. He watched in a sort of disgust as Hobbs wolfed his steak with the relish of a hungry lobo. He was breathless with anger as he warned: "You won't get a second chance, Hobbs. Are you going to let a paltry hangin' fee cut you out of this?"

"No," Hobbs said, "I'm letting my conscience do it. I've got a feeling your offer will be about as good as Confederate currency, by tomorrow morning."

As they arose, Abe Wolfert had a cynical smile. "That's another brag I wouldn't bet on," he said softly.

The import of that remark stayed in Hobbs' mind. He kept juggling it around, thinking off-handedly about Jerry Clain, and then his mind slipped back to Earl Ott, the twelfth juror. Suddenly it hit him: Jerry Clain's first stop would probably be Ott's office. He'd want to even the score with the man who had betrayed him for blood money.

Hobbs left hurriedly, walking across the plaza to the building in which Ott had his office. He mounted the stairway to the second floor and rapped on the door. There was no answer.

Hobbs put his shoulder hard against the door and felt it creak. Again he rammed it heavily, so that the bolt twisted out of the socket and the door banged open. Gus Hobbs went in. Standing just inside, he surveyed the empty office, and he was in this position when a knife-point came through the fabric of his coat to pink his back.

Jerry Clain's voice said: "Easy does it, Hangman. I figured you'd be along."

CHAPTER FOUR

Ballots from Hell

HOBBS let the young killer take his gun from its holster. Armed with the Colt, Clain threw the dentist's scalpel in a tray

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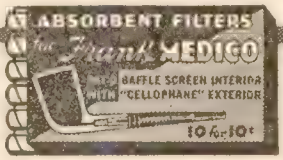

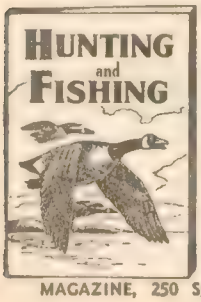

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and sat carelessly on a table while Hobbs stood waiting.

"Two killin's," declared Hobbs, "won't make that rope feel any silkier."

A blond beard stubble did not add to Clain's good looks. He had rough-cut features and bright, quick eyes under heavy brows; if he was not actually a badman, he acted the part well. "I don't figure to kill you, Hangman," he said. "Not unless you make me. I'm taking you up on that offer to help me."

Hobbs let the trapped air out of his lungs. He sat down in the operating chair. "You don't give a man much chance to help you, son," he grumbled. "What am I supposed to do with you?"

"Jail's one place I ain't going," Clain said shortly. "You're supposed to be long on savvy. All right, how did I get into this mess?"

"Did you kill Banning?" Hobbs asked.

Clain thrust out his lower lip, sitting for a moment in a frowning silence. "I was with his body when that neighbor of his ran across me, like Wolfert claims," he admitted. "But that's all I know about the killing. I was meeting Barbara out there; we were going to elope. I reckon Charley got wind of it, because he was the one I met. But I'll take an oath, Hobbs, that he was dead when I found him, with a scattergun beside him! I figured I could get off by telling the truth, so I let them take me. But it didn't work out."

Hobbs said quietly watching the man's face: "Who do you reckon did it? Maybe Tom Clain?"

Jerry started. His eyes became hostile. "If you get to talkin' like that," he snapped, "we might as well quit right now."

"Just an idea," Hangin' Hobbs remarked. "I thought maybe you were pulling a hero act and hanging for your brother. Otherwise why did you confess?"

Jerry Clain grinned. "You got enough savvy for two of me," he confessed. "I just had a hunch—well, I knew Tom had had trouble with Charley Banning because Banning was afraid to testify in a tax case Tom brought against Herman's crowd. I figured he might have done it; that if he did, he'd confess before they could hang me. And that if he didn't, I might as well go as him, because they had the goods on me. I'm a four-bit cowpoke. Tom's going to amount to something."

Hobbs had a sudden wonder. "Where's this feller, Ott?"

"That's what I'm wondering," Jerry said. "I broke in here last night. He hasn't been in all day. I'll notch that hombre's ears for him before I'm through."

Gus Hobbs rubbed his chin. "I'm thinking we've got a ride ahead of us," he told the puncher. "I've got a pretty good hunch where Ott is. He's out covering some bets."

JUST after dark Gus Hobbs led a pair of rented horses up the alley behind the dentist's office. Out of the shadows slid Jerry Clain, carrying a long, blanket-wrapped object which might have been a coat-tree. At the marshal's question, he grinned: "It's Ott's portable drill. I'm expecting a toothache."

It had only been a few hours since the weekly Kingbolt-Apache Springs stage had left on the fifteen mile run into the desert, but neither Hobbs nor Jerry Clain dared ride in it. They were following on the leggiest horses Hobbs could rent.

Out there in the prairie, the wagon from Hondo would make rendezvous with the stagecoach. And in the morning the stage would start back, bearing the ballots which would tell whether Abe Wolfert or Tom Clain interpreted the law for Kingbolt for the next two years. Somewhere out there, to Hangin' Hobbs notion, Earl Ott was waiting to try again the dodge which had been scotched last night—to substitute a false ballot box for the real one.

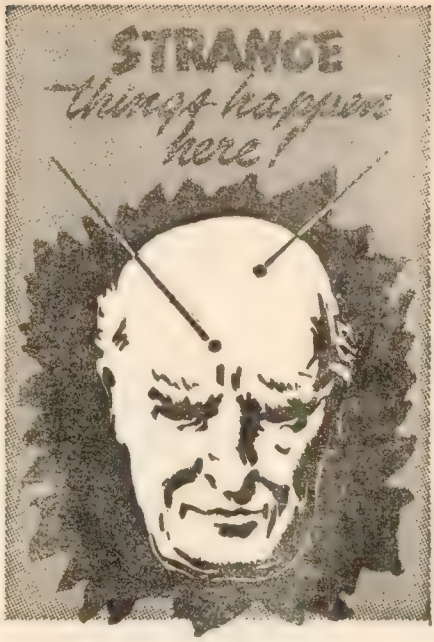
It was close to midnight when they crossed a dry wash and approached the low sprawl of adobes with their entourage of protective cottonwoods. Lights sprinkled the dark walls. Horses stood woodenly in the corrals, and Hobbs took the precaution of approaching down-wind from the animals. They dismounted in a barranca which wound through a high jungle of mesquite. Clain put down the portable drill he had carried and flexed his arms.

"Best you stay right here," Hobbs told him.

He moved carefully through the shadows to the station and put himself where he could see through a dusty window into the main room of the *posta.* There were four men sitting around the round corner fireplace. One was a stout man in old black pants and red shirt and suspenders, probably the station-keeper. Two of the others were the drivers of the Kingbolt stage and the express wagon from Hondo. The fourth man was the dentist.

Ott appeared bored by the conversation. For fifteen minutes Hobbs watched him yawn at the windies the others were spinning; he sipped his crockery cup of red wine and smoked languidly. Finally he stood up, stretched, and started off to bed.

Hobbs trudged around to the side and waited at a corner for ten minutes. At length he heard the sound he had been awaiting: the rasp of a window being raised. The dentist backed out the window. Then he reached in-



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side and hauled out a box similar to the one with which Herman's cronies had tried to swing the Kingbolt election. On tip-toes, he started for the barn.

Gus Hobbs let him raise the leather flap of the boot before he moved in behind him and touched his spine with the muzzle of his Colt. "Ain't you cast your vote yet, Ott?" he inquired gently.

OTT gave a frightened little gasp, and froze. Hobbs' hand turned him roughly. The dentist exclaimed: "Hobbs! I—I was just fixing to get something I left in my bag."

The marshal said, "I like a good windy as well as the next man, Ott, but right now I'm in a hurry. You and me both know why you're out here."

He picked up the ballot box and started Ott into the brush. "One bleat out of you," he warned, "and I'll massage your scalp with the ejector of this here Colt."

Ott stumbled along, a terrified, defeated little man. When they came into the dry wash and he saw Jerry Clain lying on the sand smoking a cigarette, his hard young features illumined by the glow, Ott groaned.

"Clain!" he quavered. "Boy, you wouldn't kill me! I done what I had to. I was sworn to vote as I saw just."

Clain snapped the cigarette against the cut-bank. "You weren't sworn to turn the votes of eleven other men," he said curtly.

Earl Ott moistened his lips. He spread his fingers imploringly. "Gents, I'll take my oath on the Book—"

Hanging Gus Hobbs' fat features solidified into grim resolution.

"I've got a confession already wrote out for you, setting down that you accepted a ranch from Max Herman and Abe Wolfert to help hang this boy, and I want your John Henry on it without any more hemmin'.

"But it ain't true!" the dentist wailed.

Hobbs sighed. "Crank 'er up, Jerry."

Clain set up the portable drill while Hobbs quickly looped a piggin' string around the dentist and trussed him. Hobbs wadded a handkerchief and thrust it into the back of Ott's mouth to muffle his yells. Then he sat on the struggling man's chest while Jerry Clain prepared to work with the drill.

Clain studied the dentist's teeth as Hobbs held the lips back. "I reckon I'll carve a Seven Underbit out of that buck tooth in front," he announced, and began to tromp the pedal of the drill. He brought the rough metal burr against the edge of an incisor, while the dentist gagged and threshed and moaned.

"That takes care of the down-slash," he said finally.

"Kinda skimpy," Hobbs said critically. "Better bring her down to the gums."

Earl Ott groaned. "Just a minute," Hobbs said to Jerry Clain. "Ready to sign, Ott?"

Ott shook his head. Jerry Clain finished the Seven Underbit, leaving the tooth hanging by a slender upright. Clain then selected a new drill, this one a round-headed burr with deep cutting edges. "Let's try a molar this time," he suggested. "Straight down from the top till we hit oil."

The drill had hardly carved a pocket its own diameter when Ott sagged limply. Hobbs removed the gag.

"All right," Ott whispered. "I did it! Sid Priest was the killer."

"Priest!" Hobbs exclaimed.

Sweat was standing in shiny beads on Earl Ott's forehead. "I got the whole story from Priest a couple days after he arrested Clain," he gasped out. "He come to me to have a tooth out. While he was under gas he started to talk—spilled the whole thing. I took it all down and when he come to I suggested that it might be smart to fix me up with one of those foreclosed ranches.

"Herman took care of it. Then they come around and told me I was in it up to the eyeballs and would have to help out. Wolfert fixed it for me to be on the jury." Ott started to plead. "I didn't have no choice, boys! It was either that or a slug in the back—honest!"

Hobbs dragged him to his feet. "You're in it to the roots of your hair, Ott, and now you're going back and spill the story. There's going to be a hanging all right, but Jerry Clain's going to have his feet right on the ground all through it."

NOT long after dawn the Kingbolt stage passed them. Riding far back in the brush, they were unobserved by the driver as the Concord whipped past, trailing dust.

They could not possibly arrive in time for the counting of the votes, now. Tom Clain would be on his own, this time.

The morning was half-spent when they jogged into town, Clain and Earl Ott riding double on a tired pony. Gus Hobbs chose side streets, working around to the rear of Tom Clain's office. He left Jerry Clain and Ott in the alley and walked upstairs.

Tom Clain and Barbara Banning started as the portly hangman appeared in the door. "Hobbs!" Clain said in surprise. "I thought you'd pulled out. Dang that brother of mine! He's fixed himself right, now. Here I am prosecutor of Dona Maria county, and I've got a jailbreak to try and cover up."

"You got a gun?" Hangin' Hobbs inquired.

Clain pulled out a drawer. "Sure. Why?"

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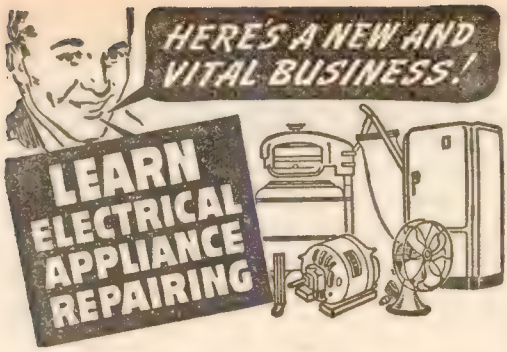

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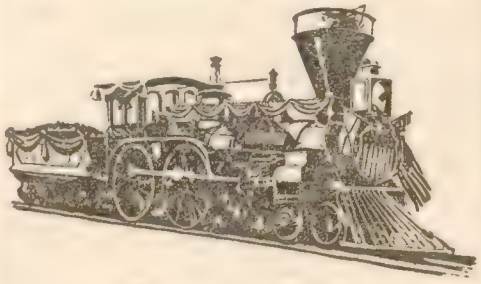

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Hobbs said, "Jerry's down in the alley with Ott, the dentist. Ott spilled the works. Sid Priest killed Charley Banning and made Ott help frame Jerry. If you want to appoint yourself sheriff, we'll make some arrests."

Clain was standing up, jamming the gun under his belt. "For a crack at Sid Priest, I'd go armed with a bow and arrow," he declared.

When the knock came at the door of Mayor Max Herman's office, the trio inside was silent for a few minutes. Then Herman's gravelly voice said, "Must be Ott—the dirty little snide. All right, Abe; let him in."

Abe Wolfert opened the door. It *was* Earl Ott who stepped inside. Herman's bellow struck him like an explosion.

"Ott! What the hell did you do last night—get likkered up and forget about the ballots?"

The dentist made several attempts to speak. His mouth opened, showing a fantastically carved upper incisor. Finally he croaked: "The—hangman, Max—!"

"What about the hangman?" Herman barked.

The hangman himself gave Herman his reply. Hobbs pushed Ott out of the way and came into the room, Tom and Jerry Clain backing him up. "I persuaded Ott to tell us about Sid Priest, and some other things," Hobbs stated. He stooped to set the telescope bag carrying Rectifier on the floor. "No need to have any unpleasantness, now, gents. You and Wolfert, Herman, will probably go up to Santa Fé to learn how to make gunny sacks and hair bridles. Priest's the only one I've got any truck with. I came here to hang a man, and he's it!"

Priest's eyes were hard, quick.

He said, "You can spin taller yarns than forty drunken cowboys, Hobbs. Let's throw this fat porpoise out of here, Max."

He started across the room as Hobbs said quietly: "You better not be walking when I finish talking, Priest, or you'll be a walking corpse." He said to the others, "You're fools if you back his play. He's the only one that stands to hang—as it is now."

Sid Priest was suddenly hurling his stocky body to the floor, pulling the Colt out and up as he sprawled. Gus Hobbs gave Ott, the dentist, a shove, forcing him between them as he pulled his own gun. He had a quick glance for the other men; it was all he needed, to know the whole plan had fallen to pieces, for

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Priest's gun crashed. Earl Ott stumbled and sagged to his knees, and Hobbs brought his own gun to life with a slow squeeze of the trigger. The bullet took Priest in the neck—

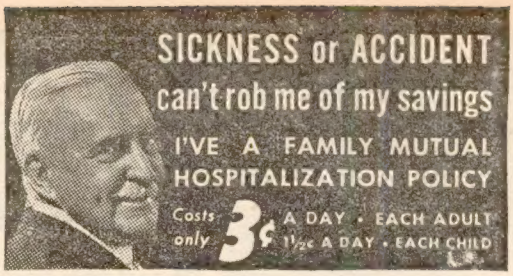
The Clains were in on this too, meeting Max Herman's and Abe Wolfert's lead with shots of their own. Herman was no gunman; his game was to hire his killings done, to watch from keyholes while other men took the risks for him. But Fate had pulled a sleeve gun on him, this time; it was fight or quit. He kept his gun bellowing, spending the shots like gamblers' wealth. Slugs chopped through the door and dug troughs in the floor. But none of the bullets touched Jerry or Tom Clain. They stood shoulder to shoulder, fighting.

Slowly, Max Herman sank back into his swivel chair, his gross body sprawled loosely. Abe Wolfert was going down, too, one hand clutching at the corner of the desk, his eyes starkly blank as though he were already hearing Death making a charge to one jury which could not be bought off.

THE stage conductor who put Hangin' Gus Hobbs' bags in the boot that evening was the same man who had taken them out for him a few days before. He had a jaundiced eye for the stout marshal. He said, "Git the job done pretty, hangman?"

Gus Hobbs thought of a sharp retort, then changed his mind; why argue with a public that would never understand him? "Hangrope or Colt," he said, "it don't make no difference to me just so the job gets done."

But he felt a warm, professional glow of satisfaction in having done his job well. And in knowing of a certain hard-jawed youngster would probably get a lot of enjoyment in the years to come by telling a fantastic story about Hangin' Gus Hobbs—dealer in hemp, and happiness! THE END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Exquisite 30-Piece SET of Fine QUALITY SILVER PLATE

A Luxurious Treasure At A Thrilling Low Bargain Price

Here at last is the silver plated ware you've always wanted, yet felt you couldn't afford. Glorious Silver plate of exquisite grace and design, long-life quality and sparkling beauty—yours to treasure and enjoy at a price far below your fondest expectations. A price so low, we dare challenge comparison with silver plate sets costing twice as much. You'll be proud to have this lovely set grace your table . . . proud to have friends in to dinner because each of the 30 pieces are beautifully matched, perfectly balanced, and heavily Silver-plated overall, and unconditionally guaranteed to give you absolute satisfaction.

Limited Supply - Order Before Sell-Out

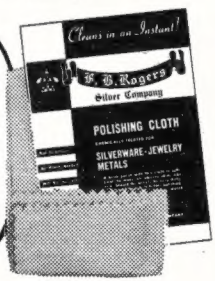
In these days when, as you all know, production of all types of silverware has been sharply curtailed, we felt it was a lucky purchase indeed that made it even possible for us to make this amazing offer to our customers. We wish we had three times as many sets, the demand is so great and the supply so limited. That's why we are forced to say "First come—first served." Yes, this offer is good Only as long as our present supply lasts and may never be repeated again. So if you need Silverware, don't put off sending in your order. Do it now while you have a chance to get such a beautiful and valuable 30 piece set of quality Silver Plate at such a truly sensational saving.

Examine At Our Risk!

So sure are we that you will be thrilled and pleased beyond words with this luxurious 30 piece set of Quality Silver Plate when you see it, we cheerfully make this liberal offer. SEND NO MONEY. Simply fill out and mail the order coupon below. Immediately upon receipt of your order we'll rush you the complete 30 piece set in its luxurious anti-tarnish case. Upon arrival give postman the sale price of only $9.95 plus few cents postage and C.O.D. charges. Then examine the set for 10 full days. Show it to friends and family. Compare its quality and price with far more expensive sets. Then if you don't agree that it is far and beyond the loveliest set you've ever seen for so little money, return it to us and we'll refund every penny you deposited with the postman. Could anything be more fair? Your satisfaction is guaranteed at our expense! So how can you lose?

FREE
Rogers Silver Polishing Cloth

Yes, if you order at once, we will include this nationally famous chemically treated Silver Polishing Cloth absolutely FREE of charge.



SEND NO MONEY
Mail Coupon Today

NATIONAL NOVELTIES—Dept. S T 1
608 South Dearborn Street—Chicago 5, Illinois

Please rush 30 piece set of Quality Silver Plate complete with Anti-Tarnish Cabinet and Free Rogers Silver Polishing Cloth for 10 day examination. I will pay postman only $9.95 C.O.D. plus postage on arrival. It is understood that if I am not more than satisfied in every way I can return set in 10 days for complete refund.

Name_____
(Please Print Clearly)
Address_____
City_____ State_____

You save postage and C.O.D. fee by enclosing payment with order. Same money-back guarantee of satisfaction.

ANYONE WHO KNOWS
CAN TELL THE
REAL THING!

...THAT'S WHY
CLEAR HEADS CHOOSE
Calvert

If you've a taste for fine whiskey, you're certain to recognize Calvert as "the real thing". For it has a pre-war quality and excellence that simply can't be imitated.

That's probably the reason why, year in and year out, people who sell and serve Calvert tell us: "It's the whiskey most often asked for by name."

Once you taste this gloriously smooth and mellow blend, *you'll* keep on asking for Calvert, too. It's America's finest whiskey from the House of Blends!

Calvert Distillers Corp., N.Y.C. BLENDED WHISKEY
86.8 Proof. "Reserve": 65% Grain Neutral Spirits..."Special": 72½% Grain Neutral Spirits